January 1999 Vol. 24, No. 5 $2.50 CAN $3.25

# S·o·j·o·u·r·n·e·r

The Women's Forum

# We Who Believe in Freedom...

Fighting Gender Apartheid under the Taliban

"Hands Off Assata Shakur"

**FILM FOCUS:**
***The Brandon Teena Story,***
***Life Is Beautiful,***
**and video picks for a long winter's night**

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# DOT & FLO

## "We told you so."

Don't sit all alone with your problems. Get expert, eccentric, exceptional—and sometimes contradictory—advice from *Sojourner*'s own Dot & Flo, purveyors of opinion on the personal and the political. Send your queries and tales of woe to: Dot & Flo, c/o *Sojourner*, 42 Seaverns Avenue, Boston, MA 02130; or fax to (617) 524-9397; or e-mail to: Dot-Flo@sojourner.org.

*Dear Gentle, Angry Readers,*

Are your earmuffs too tight? Are you skipping over our advice column in your rush to the therapy ads? We've looked around and now must face this cold, hard reality: why oh why is no one out there sitting up straight and heeding our advice? It has not escaped our notice that the world is going to hell in a handbasket, while month after month we try to do our little part to hold it all together. We now know you aren't listening, and we don't appreciate it.

If you'd look around, you'd see bad news from all quarters—from the immensely serious to the trite and trivial. The stock market and marriage rates are skyrocketing; that always smells fishy. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts is showing that it has no qualms about being even more uncaring and mean-spirited than other states. Specifically, in the name of its many good citizens, the state is actually sending *holiday greetings* to the poor with letters terminating welfare benefits. Yes, it's true. For the first time since the Great Depression, there is no help at all from the government to assure even the barest of a subsistence.

On our local neighborhood front, there are just too many 40-ton four-wheel drive vehicles on the road (and we know some of you are driving them). What, are you expecting to pull off the highway during your commute and do some off-road touring? Does the parking lot to the charter school's soccer field need repaving? Which reminds us: politicians, and now virtually everyone else with the means, have abandoned public education and are heading for the lily-white hills. Direct actions are brewing, or they should be. . . .

On a really serious note, still no hoops for us because the NBA is stuck in some kind of labor dispute, for godsakes. To top it all off, we haven't had a decent snowstorm out East in years and sledding is the only exercise we enjoy. Too few people care about too few things, and most of them involve big material objects they want to acquire. Far too few of us are giving far too little money to women's organizations. Get it? Are we making ourselves clear? People are just plain rude and mean, and our guidance apparently isn't helping things.

Okay, one last story, and then we'll let you go. We heard two women at lunch earlier this week bragging about their high life (of course we were listening). One thinks she is on top of the world because she made a killing in the stock market this past year, and gloats about unprecedented capital gains, all the while harassing the waitress, embarrassing her friend, leaving a shitty tip (of course we counted), and annoying all of us who had the decency to listen in. Well, Dot and Flo just bellied up to the lunch counter and told her to straighten up her damn life and stop treating her sisters like dirt. We are the dirt police, and if your act needs cleaning up, we don't mind telling you.

Dot and Flo are here for you, too, gentle and angry readers. But we are compelled to ask if you appreciate us as much as we appreciate ourselves. Sisters, a new year is coming. Life is short and people are suffering, and sometimes they're suffering 'cause of you. Shape up. Take better care of yourselves, those you love, and those you're supposed to love (but they make it oh so hard). Then try to take a little care of the world around us. We've got your back.

# MEDIA WATCH

# 'Tis the Season to Mock Folly:

## Post-Election Carols for Melodic Progressives

### By Jennifer L. Pozner

Civil disobedience comes in many forms. Sometimes it's as staid an act as casting a vote for the lesser of two evils. Other times revolutionary action can burst forth in song—a perfect example being "Operation I Saw Mommy Kissing Mrs. Klaus," a lively visibility action performed by the Lesbian Avengers at a Boston shopping mall not many years ago.

So, this month I offer a humble suggestion—merge both of the above and sing your rebellion! As a feminist, even the best elections often leave me cold. And, as a Jew, the ever-present din of crass Christmas commercialism quickly grows old. In the spirit of non-specific holiday mirth and shiny, happy electoral cynicism, I offer the following Post-Election Carols for Melodic Progressives. If you have a penchant for parody, consider the following songs and poem as a sort of starter kit for creating your own alternative carols. Think of it—this could be the most subversive choral activity since the TV Nation Gay Men's Chorus serenaded Senator Jesse Helms with "On The Street Where You Live" outside his bedroom window. Nothing would make me happier than to welcome a cheery chorus of *Sojourner* singers inside for cocoa and media criticism! So, without any further ado. . . .

#### Rejoice Ye Merry Democrats
(To the tune of *G-d Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen*)

Rejoice ye merry Democrats,
for once let's not dismay.
Our party did make history
this past election day.
We picked up five seats in the House,
held the GOP at bay
Oh tidings of reserved joy, reserved joy
Oh tidings of reserved joy.

The public, tired of cigars,
dress stains, and Kenneth Starr
decided for our government
more important issues are:
the environment, safe housing—
almost anything else, by far
Oh, tidings of reserved joy, reserved joy
Oh tidings of reserved joy.

McLaughlin, Cokie Roberts, George
Will, Jennings and Dan Rather
predicted a Republican landslide
and other hollow blather.
Such fun to see them hem and haw
o'er their gaffes on the matter
Oh tidings of reserved joy, reserved joy
Oh tidings of reserved joy

Now comes the time to call to task
Dem leaders we've elected.
Minorities, women, and the poor
ensured they were selected.
If they ignore our needs they'll see
how quickly they'll be ejected,
Oh, tidings of reserved joy, reserved joy
Oh tidings of reserved joy.

#### Left Congress
(To the tune of *White Christmas*)

I was fearing another Right Congress
that would uphold the status quo.
But the pundits misspoke,
and now Newt's a joke,
and Alfonse D'Amato has to go
to go. . . .

Now I'm dreaming of a Left Congress,
hope many liberal bills they'll write.
They could grant universal health care,
and stop gutting welfare,
and stand up for reproductive rights
our rights. . . .

So, I'll be lobbying for a Left Congress—
just watch our progressive platform grow
But don't get too comfy—oh, no . . .
'cause we've still got a damn long way to go!

#### Deck the House
(Many thanks to Beth J. Murray, diva of all things sardonic, for her help in constructing this ditty.)

Deck the House with lewd subpoenas
Fa la la la la/ la la la la
We've heard enough of Clinton's penis
Fa la la la la/ la la la la
Seize the chance that is before us
Fa la la/ la la la/ la la la
To prove Zippergate does bore us
Fa la la la la/ la la la la.

Fast away impeachment passes
Fa la la la la/ la la la la
Hail the new Dem lads and lasses
Fa la la la la/ la la la la
Focus now on legislation
Fa la la/ la la la/ la la la
Prove we're not a right-wing nation
Fa la la la la/ la la la la.

*And, for those storytellers among us. . . .*

#### T'was the Night of Elections
(With apologies to Clement Moore)

T'was the night of elections,
and all through the House
Republican Reps
had their ambitions doused.

Their predicted majority
slipped right through their fingers;
their party sabotaged
by rabid right-wingers.

The analysts scrambled
out to exit polls
to cast furtive glimpses
into voters' souls.

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## EDITORIAL NOTES

**January 1999**
A new year with new struggles ahead. This first issue of 1999 focuses on all kinds of prisons, and women's resistance to them. We follow lawsuits that challenge routine sexual abuse of women incarcerated in Michigan, and look at growing efforts to free women in Afghanistan placed under round-the-clock house arrest by the Taliban regime. This issue also brings you the story of Assata Shakur, the former Black Panther who escaped from a U.S. prison and fled to Cuba some twenty years ago. In a strange new twist, the state of New Jersey has made the capture of Shakur a priority and has issued a bounty for her return.

**Welfare Deform, Part the Second**
The other focus this month is part two of "Welfare Deform." We hear from welfare recipients in the *Sojourner* roundtable, including several women who have just lost their benefits because of time limits. We also hear from activists and recipients who recently called a "state of emergency" and engaged in civil disobedience to protest the withdrawal of support for women and children.

**And the Sojourner Sit-In**
If we could figure out exactly where to do a sit-in for more grants and donations, we might try it. . . . but most likely, the *Sojourner* staff and volunteers will have to figure out some other kind of dramatic fundraising action. We are, in fact, getting ready to launch a new, ambitious campaign to raise the funds to support the newspaper in 1999. So, how about writing that check you've been meaning to write for awhile now? Subscriptions cover only a fraction of the cost of each issue, and we rely on your gifts. If you want to make sure we keep coming to your door every month with the feminist news and commentary you know you'll never find anyplace else—please pitch in! Become a Sojourner Sustainer (just $120 a year) or give any gift you can.

All of us here at the paper thank you in advance for your commitment and your donations. Thank you for making *Sojourner* possible.

**Errata**
Last month's coverage of the vigil in Boston for Dr. Barnett Slepian neglected to note that the event was co-sponsored by Boston NOW and Massachusetts NARAL.

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**Warmest wishes for a Happy New Year from everyone at *Sojourner*.**

# Sojourner
The Women's Forum

Volume 24, Number 5

Sojourner Truth
*African American Feminist & Abolitionist, 1797 - 1883*

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### Editorial Policy
*Sojourner* is a feminist newspaper committed to publishing writing by and for women. We are committed to the elimination of sexism, racism, and homophobia and other issues that oppress and divide us. We especially encourage writing that challenges the oppressive assumptions and structures that shape our communities, locally, nationally, and internationally—writing that compels women to speak and act. Our goal is to create a forum for women to inform, challenge, and encourage each other. We often invite controversy because we believe that the changes we seek to promote are dependent on frank and open discussion of the problems and challenges we face.

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## WELFARE NOT MY FIGHT

As a white, middle-class feminist, I am tired of reading that middle-class stereotypes have prevailed to bias things against welfare women, when what I am reading is itself full of biases about middle class and poor women. The worst [myth] is that poor and middle-class women have the "choice" of working or staying home to raise their children. Few middle-class women and fewer "working poor" women have this choice. Many single and divorced (and married) women must work to support their children—yes, even with child support. Many women limit family size because they feel they do not have the money to adequately provide for an additional child. It is a hard sell to convince these working women, who do not have the luxury of staying home to watch their own children grow up, to give their hard-earned dollars to another woman [through welfare] so that she can do what they cannot.

Another bias is the total lack of acknowledgment that there are women who are welfare cheats—there are cheats in any walk of life. Lack of serious discussion on this difficult issue by welfare rights activists has made the fight not my fight. I would fight for a woman to have a chance for more education while supporting her on welfare but not so she could stay home and have more children. I would fight for her to have job training and access to good paying jobs, but not so she can stay home while so many others have to work. I would fight for her to have better access to drug rehab but not the right to stay home and give birth to crack-addicted babies.

The "right" to stay home and raise our children might be acceptable if it encompassed all. But pretending that staying home should be a "right" for welfare mothers when it is not a "right" for other mothers just isn't going to fly.

Karen Elbe
Philadelphia, PA

## LOOKING FOR A FREE WORLD FRIEND

I am an African American woman prisoner serving a lengthy sentence for a charge on my ex-boyfriend, who abused me in every way possible. I have been here for awhile, and I go to my next parole-board hearing soon.

I have no family to speak of—in the sense that they don't help me. If not for friends in the free world, I can't imagine how I would have made it so far!

However, one friend, who diligently stuck by me almost from the beginning, can no longer help me because of personal difficulties, which leaves me virtually without anyone on my visiting list. To be a prisoner without a visiting list is like having one's hands tied behind your back.

I truly need a friend out there in the free world. If you are at all interested in my plight, please contact me:

Ms. Sonya Kay Clark #17400
1479 Collins Ave (ARN 1)
Marysville, OH 43040

## NOWHERE ELSE

I want to express my gratitude for your publication. You are saying much in your paper that isn't found elsewhere—"Welfare Beat" is one example. I also appreciate Jennifer Pozner's column, which is always amusing and informative.

I am pleased to note that I helped get a local feminist bookstore to carry *Sojourner*, and when I go to get a copy, there is usually only one left on the shelf.

Again, I appreciate your work and the writers who contribute to *Sojourner*.

Themis Sfore
Austin, TX

## DISABILITY 101

*Editor's note: The following was written in response to Judy Kruger's November letter to the editor about Carrie Dearborn's article "Disability 101." Kruger said that contrary to what Dearborn wrote about the difficulty of getting SSDI or SSI for conditions like chronic fatigue, it is quite possible to receive such benefits. (See* Sojourner, *October 1998).*

Dear Ms. Kruger,

I'm glad you wrote. Maybe all those hours I spent sitting in at the State House in Boston—along with all the work other activists around the country have put in on these kinds of issues—actually did some good. Maybe we showed the public and the politicians that disabled people are not lambs to be lead to slaughter. Believe me, sometimes I wonder.

Had you kept reading, you would have seen that I did say, "Occasionally, Medicaid gives up and allows benefits for people with these disorders"—chronic fatigue and multiple chemical sensitivities. I admit, I put it badly. I should have said that it has historically been very difficult to get these benefits.

You may also live where Medicaid makes more sense. You do live in a different district than I do, and all the documentation in the world has been known to fail in a lot of jurisdictions. Apparently, this isn't so true anymore. Congratulations, and thanks again for writing.

Carrie Dearborn
Jamaica Plain, MA


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# The Bottomline

# No Shame, No Gain

By Susie Day

A lot of media attention has been devoted lately to self-serving apologies by prominent heterosexuals. But shouldn't queers serve themselves, too, apologetically speaking? Here are a few possibilities:

*Dear Mr. and Mrs. John Q. Public:*

Are you sitting down? Good, because we of the lesbian, gay, transgender, and bisexual community have something to confess. For years, we have had all kinds of secret, kinky, shameful, stainful, disgusting S-E-X!!! SEX SEX SEX SEX SEX!!! Unfortunately, none of it was with Monica Lewinsky. And for that, we are very, very sorry.

[OOOOO◄——tear stains]

We stayed up all night, praying and thinking about this, and we feel just terrible. Do you forgive us?

You see, if we had had sex with Monica Lewinsky, we would be your President now, and we deeply regret that, too.

For, if we were your President, we think you would notice us more. You'd force us to recount our weird, unzipped antics in front of roomsful of total strangers. You'd put the graphic details of our morally deranged sex lives on the Web. You'd beg for samples of our coital secretions. But you don't; it's like we don't exist.

Frankly, Mr. and Mrs. P., we queers have grown disappointed with the increasingly low quality of your homophobia. Your media barely bother to cover anti-gay attacks anymore. And your job and housing discrimination has become ho-hum, even predictable.

Well, we want to tell you that we're *still* here and *still* queer!

[:PPP ◄——raspberries]

And we *demand* equal opportunity harassment! You can't just throw us out like an old shoe! We've given you the best years of our lives, dammit—and what do we get? *Him.*

[oooo ◄—— sperm stains]

We know it's the '90s, and we're just as fed up as you are with politically correct jargon, but for pity's sake, people, *look* at who you're throwing us over for: a straight, white man!

*We're the perverts*, you sickos! It's humiliating to be left for a . . . a *tramp* who can't even pick out his own ties. We feel so cheap, so used.

[OOOO◄—— more tear stains]

We ask now for God's help and a little more on-camera groveling time, so we can win you back. In the meanwhile, we beg you. Don't dismiss us. Don't turn us away. With your support, we'd like to continue as your First Scapegoat for years to come.

*Dear President Clinton:*

We proud American homos would like to take this opportunity to express our sincere apologies to you, our Executive Leader. After all, we know what it's like to be persecuted for one's sexual practices. And in the past we've stood up bravely in defense of open relationships and the right to be sexually promiscuous. Yessir, we care deeply about sexual rights for all, and we're sorry we can't be there for you in your hour of need, but, uh. . . .

We're busy. Yeah. That's it. Busy! We're doing each other's hair. Buying new frocks. Writing out wedding invitations. Then, because of the rights *you've* helped *us* defend, we're all going to legally marry each other! We're so terribly atwitter!

Say, here's a thought. Since we're busy and all, maybe you could look up some of the folks you've supported in the past. Like Lani Guinier or Joycelyn Elders. Of course, what you did to *them* wasn't consensual, but we're sure they've forgiven you. Oh, and while you're at it, would you mind asking Dr. Elders what she, as former Surgeon General, thinks of people replacing their old latex dildos with cigars? Like, could we still get cancer if we lit them . . . "down there"? We'd like to put the info in a safer-sex pamphlet we're writing to spice up our wedding night!

*Dear Religious Leaders and Media Pundits:*

We queers are terribly sorry we haven't been paying attention to you. It's just that we already know what you're saying: CLINTON! blahblahblah; LIES! blahblahblah; SEX! blahblahblah; IMPEACH! blahblahblah.

We admit we're insolent and wrong. However, we can't help but think that, in this turbulent moment of United States history, our Attention Deficit Disorder is standing us in good stead.

We further confess that sometimes, as our attention wanders, we think evil thoughts. We think: "Is it not strange that the goings-on our President has *not* lied about are never analyzed? Like bombing Afghanistan and that pharmaceuticals factory in Sudan? No telling how many people we killed there. How come those jerkface talking heads can't debate the morality of that?"

But when we force ourselves to focus on what you're saying, we conclude that it's not morality that matters here: it's lies. If you're President, it's okay to tell the truth about ordering your armed forces to kill people. But in our Democracy, *everybody* lies about sex, even Presidents.

Because, of course, sex is bad. Violence, however, is hot and pulsating. Which just makes us queers all the more eager to win your approval by getting into the military!

*Susie Day is still a writer who lives in Brooklyn. She wishes to add that, given some people's definition of sex, there is nothing for which any cop should bust any queer in a park or a bathroom or a bar. By the way, she also continues to love the One She Loves unapologetically.*


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The 1999 Women in Business Directory is published in January 1999

# MEDIA WATCH

*Continued from page 2*

"How'd this happen?" they queried,
"We did not see it coming!
The polls let us down. . .
oh, man, are we bumming!"

And Mike Moore on the 'Net
And I near my TV
watched the returns rolling in
as we gloated with glee.

"The Counter Coup won,"
Moore wrote on his web site,
"By voting straight Dumbocrat,
we made history tonight!"

Voter turnout was higher
than ever expected,
hence ultra-conservatives
were duly rejected.

Instead of a twenty
to forty seat gain
Americans offered Republicans
this stunning refrain:

"Out, D'Amato! Out, Beasley!
Out, Faircloth! Out, Dornan!
Now, Schumer! Now, Hodges—
a new day is dawnin'!"

To Boozman, Fong, Snowbarger,
and conservatives all
we said, "Go away, go away,
go away, y'all!"

Most "Year of the Woman" pols
held fast to their seats
warding off misguided pundits'
predicted defeats.

Boxer, Murray, and Mikulski
won, but we mourn
the close-call loss of Senator
Carol Moseley Braun.

As for governors, the Bush boys
made their Daddy right proud
casting o'er Florida and Texas
a conservative shroud.

And when Harshbarger lost
we in Mass. felt bereft—
we'd have loved a new Gov
loyal to the "loony left!"
But Cellucci nabbed the post
it cost him a mere $11 mil—
such gross spending won't fly
under our clean elections bill.

Campaign finance reform
will now help to ensure
that the rich don't buy races
at the expense of the poor.

These elections they offered
many moments bizarre
like the gubernatorial victory
of a wrestling star

in Minnesota
(no, it wasn't a scam)
Jesse "The Body" Ventura
gave a full body slam

to the body politic
With his party (Reform)
Gov. Jesse "The Mind"
Ventura was born.

The WWF pro snuck in with
a campaign so stealth,
and I laughed when I saw him
in spite of myself.

Other noteworthy items
leading up to the third
of November include
many comments absurd:
Fay Boozman asserted
rape can't cause pregnancy;
Al called Chuck a "putzhead"
in New York City;

and Dornan called himself
"Mr. Immigrant Man"
because on abortion
he supports a ban.

Overall, though, results
do a feminist proud;
on each coast our presence was
felt clear and loud.

Voters nixed harsh initiatives
in Washington and Colorado;
they ousted right-leaning incumbents
like Alfonse D'Amato.

In the House we've a gain
of nine new pro-choicers
who've pledged to respect
women's needs, and our voices.

All this despite billions
in Christian-right money
funneled to GOP races—
hey, it's really quite funny!

Though they glossed over issues
and they smeared with such flair,
when Congress reconvenes
fewer GOP stars will be there.

To poor Newt this did conjure
complete humiliation
severe 'nough to summon
his prompt resignation.

"The public has spoken,"
thought the bitter old Speaker,
"And for new leadership
Americans seems eager.

So I'll bow to the tide
that is turning away
from the right-wing extremism
I promoted back in the day

of my Contract On America
that jolly old tract
that stigmatized women,
gays, poor folks, and Blacks

and everyone else who's not
rich, white and male—
how sorry I am
that my Contract did fail."

And he bitched and he moaned
and he griped and he groused
and he packed up his ego
and stomped out of the House

and I heard him exclaim
with a sour, jealous groan
"I'm taking my toys
and I'm going on home!"

---

*Freelance writer Jennifer L. Pozner briefly considered writing "Oh, Monica, Oh, Monica," a parody of the traditional Jewish song, "Oh, Chanukah, Oh, Chanukah." After a three-minute chuckle she decided she just didn't want to go there. She encourages Media Watch readers to submit their own alternative carols, progressive poems, and other satirical fare via* Sojourner*'s Letters to the Editor. Jennifer extends her gushing thanks to Karen Weeks, Beth Murray and Kristen Harbeson, who graciously listened to seventeen versions of each of these songs within a period of four days.*


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# New Threats to Assata Shakur

## New Jersey Governor posts $100,000 bounty for capture of former Black Panther

photo © Elsha Levy

*Assata Shakur*

*I am a twentieth century escaped slave.*

—Assata Shakur

By Genevieve Howe

Feminists who were active in the '70s may recall the case of Assata Shakur, the Black Panther who escaped from prison in 1979 and has been living in Cuba since the 1980s. Shakur's story might have been considered a more or less closed chapter in the annals of FBI harassment of political groups. Shakur was, after all, one of the ones who got away—twenty years ago. What were the chances that U.S. law enforcement would renew its long-ago campaign for her capture? That the U.S. Congress would start passing resolutions calling for her immediate extradition?

As it turns out, a bizarre series of events has propelled Shakur into the political spotlight once again. New Jersey Republican Governor Christine Todd Whitman has made Shakur's extradition from Cuba a major priority, offering a $100,000 reward for Shakur's return to her state. And Shakur now seems to be in the forefront of political tensions between the United States and Cuba, inspiring Congressional action against her.

With the new bounty on her head, Shakur lives in daily fear for her life, can no longer appear in public, and communicates with only a few people.

In response to the renewed pressure, a "Hands Off Assata Campaign" is gaining momentum in the United States.

### New Jersey Turnpike, May 2, 1973

The pivotal day in Shakur's life was May 2, 1973, when she and two companions were stopped by state troopers on the New Jersey Turnpike, reportedly for a faulty tail light. One of the troopers, James Harper, later said the officers had become suspicious when they saw Black passengers traveling in a car with Vermont plates. A shootout occurred that left trooper Werner Foerster and passenger Zayd Malik Shakur dead. Assata Shakur and the other passenger, Sundiata Acoli, were accused of participating in the murders of both Foerster and Zayd Shakur and of attempting to murder trooper Harper, who sustained a minor injury.

At the time, Assata Shakur was JoAnne Chesimard, a nationally known activist in the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army. Shakur and many others were targets of the FBI's counterintelligence program known as COINTELPRO. According to an FBI memorandum of August 25, 1967, "The purpose of [COINTELPRO] was to expose, disrupt, misdirect, or otherwise neutralize the activities of Black nationalist hate-type organizations and groupings, their leadership, spokesmen, membership and supporters. . . ."

In 1977, an all-white jury convicted Shakur of the trooper's murder despite substantial evidence of her innocence. Three neurologists testified that her median nerve had been severed by gunshot wounds, which rendered her unable to pull a trigger, and that her clavicle had been shattered by a bullet that could have entered only from the back while she was seated in the car with her hands up. Other experts testified that a neutron activation test done by police after the shootings showed no gun powder residue on her hands. The jury also convicted Shakur of possession of weapons—even though there was no evidence that she had handled the weapons—and of attempting to murder Harper. Harper initially claimed Shakur tried to kill him, but later changed his testimony and admitted that he never saw Shakur with a gun and never saw her try to shoot him.

According to Lennox Hinds, one of Shakur's attorneys, "it was the racism in Middlesex County, fueled by biased, inflammatory publicity in the local press before and throughout the trial, fanned by the documented government lawlessness, that made it possible for the white jury to convict Assata on the uncorroborated, contradictory, and generally incredible testimony of trooper Harper."

Before the fateful 1973 New Jersey Turnpike incident, Shakur had already been accused in six different criminal cases. In all six cases, she was eventually acquitted or the charges were dismissed. As Shakur said in her March 1998 testimony to the U.N. Human Rights Commission:

*This political persecution was part and parcel of the government's policy of eliminating political opponents by charging them with crimes and arresting them with no regard to the factual basis of such charges.*

Finally convicted of a crime in the Turnpike incident, Shakur spent six and a half years in prison, nearly two and a half years of which were spent in solitary confinement, mostly in men's prisons. She was beaten and verbally abused by guards and denied medical treatment while pregnant. Yet, she was never cited for violating prison rules. She gave birth to her daughter, Kakuya, while in prison.

But while her codefendant, Sundiata Acoli, is still serving time for the murders, Shakur pulled off a miraculous escape from prison on November 2, 1979. She was placed on the FBI's Most Wanted List and hunted by authorities. Across the United States, Black women were detained under the pretext that they looked like Assata. Heavily armed SWAT teams invaded homes of Black activists, on the pretense that they were a safe house for this dangerous "cop killer."

In her testimony to the United Nations, Shakur said:

*They call me the "most wanted woman" in America. "I find that ironic. I've never felt very "wanted" before. When it came to jobs, I was never the "most wanted," when it came to economic opportunities, I was never the "most wanted" or when it came to decent housing. It seems like the only time Black people are on the "most wanted" list is when they want to put us in prison.*

Now 51, Shakur has been living in Cuba, where she was granted political refugee status, since the mid 1980s. Until recently, she was a public figure, speaking out against human rights violations in the United States and other parts of the world.

### December 1997, the Pope and Christine Todd Whitman

Things began to heat up in December 1997, when the New Jersey State Police suddenly announced that it had sent a letter to Pope John Paul II—who was traveling to Cuba the following month—to ask his intervention on behalf of extraditing Shakur to New Jersey. Shakur then wrote her own letter to the Pope—an open letter—which was widely distributed and translated into several languages. In it, she said:

*I have advocated and I still advocate revolutionary changes in the structure and in the principles that govern the U.S. I advocate an end to capitalist exploitation, the abolition of racist policies, the eradication of sexism, and the elimination of political repression. If that is a crime, then I am totally guilty.*

*. . . Let me emphasize that justice for me is not the issue . . . it is justice for my people that is at stake. When my people receive justice, I am sure that I will receive it, too.*

The next event was a request for an interview from Ralph Penza, a reporter from the NBC affiliate in New York City. Penza told Shakur he wanted to ask about her letter to the Pope, her experiences with the New Jersey legal system, and her views on the treatment of Black people in the United States over the past 25 years. Shakur agreed, hoping that, as she later wrote, "I might finally get the opportunity to tell 'my side of the story.'"

When the three-part story aired in early February of 1998, it portrayed Shakur as a "cop killer" living an easy life in Cuba, implied that a photo of another woman with a gun was Shakur, and gave most of the time to members of the New Jersey Police Department and the widow of the trooper who died on the highway. "NBC deliberately misrepresented the truth," said Shakur in a statement she wrote reacting to the series.

When New Jersey Governor Christine Todd Whitman saw the NBC news reports, she was reportedly infuriated by Shakur's lack of remorse and moved by the plight of the trooper's widow. She "hit the roof," according to the Governor's spokesperson Pete McDonough. "It was a galvanizing experience for the governor," he told *Sojourner*. Whitman immediately doubled the previous reward for Shakur's return to New Jersey from $50,000 to $100,000.

Whitman also sent a letter to President Clinton asking for his support in extraditing Shakur and asking him to condition any lifting of the U.S. government's embargo against Cuba on the return of Shakur and the approximately 90 other American "fugitives" the United States says live in Cuba. Clinton responded that he "would do all he could" to extradite her, according to McDonough. In March 1998, Whitman wrote to U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno demanding that the federal government do whatever it could to bring Shakur back to New Jersey.

Then, legislators got into the act. U.S. Representative Robert Franks, (R-NJ), introduced

*Continued on next page*

*Continued from previous page*

a resolution on May 1, 1998, calling for Shakur's extradition. On September 15, 1998, it passed the U.S. House by 371 to 0. All 23 members of the Congressional Black Caucus who were present voted in favor of the resolution. Only two members have rescinded their votes: Maxine Waters (D-CA) and Barbara Lee (D-CA). In a letter to Fidel Castro, Waters expressed her support for Cuba's protection of Shakur and explained that she did not recognize the name of "JoAnne Chesimard" in the legislation as referring to Shakur. Waters plans to lead a delegation of the Congressional Black Caucus to Cuba.

The New Jersey State legislature unanimously passed a resolution on October 22, 1998, endorsing both the U.S. Congress's call for Shakur's extradition and Whitman's $100,000 reward.

### Radio Marti: Publicizing the Bounty

Governor Whitman did not quietly post her "reward" of $100,000. She addressed the Cuban population through Radio Marti, the U.S. government's propaganda station directed to Cuba, and pleaded for the help of everyone on the island to capture and return "JoAnne Chesimard" to New Jersey. $100,000 is no small amount of money on or off the island of Cuba.

"JoAnne Chesimard is not, as the Cuban government maintains, a refugee," Governor Whitman said in a press release last August. "She is a cop killer. As long as Fidel Castro's government shields JoAnne Chesimard from punishment, justice is denied and she gets away with murder."

When asked why Governor Whitman is making this case such a priority, her spokesperson Pete McDonough told *Sojourner*, "Because [Chesimard] is a cold blooded killer of a young father [and is] living a life of luxury in Cuba."

"In fact, she is not living a life of luxury," said Bob Guild of the National Network on Cuba. "She struggles to survive as do all Cubans."

Michael Ratner, of the Center for Constitutional Rights, attributes Whitman's keen interest in capturing Shakur to political interests. New Jersey has a large Cuban-American community, many of whom are anti-Castro, and Whitman "wants to paint Cuba as a place that harbors criminals." Ratner also commented that Whitman has designs on running for national office.

*Sojourner* asked police spokesperson John Haggarty if he believes the department will succeed in bringing Shakur back to New Jersey. "Ultimately, relations with the nation of Cuba will improve," he said, "extraditions will occur, and the police will continue to pursue this until Chesimard is back in New Jersey." Haggerty added that police are convinced of Shakur's guilt. "We have 500,000 pages of documents on this case," he said, "and crime scene photos that show that she did it."

And, if New Jersey does somehow get her back? "She will go right back to prison to complete her life sentence," said Haggerty. "Her appeal process is exhausted and she will serve the 124 years to which she was sentenced."

Michael Ratner believes that if Shakur were brought back to New Jersey, "the chances of her dying in prison are extremely high. . . . I think that a guard would probably kill her." He also called Governor Whitman's "reward" an illegal and immoral bounty. "Presumably the reward would be paid for Assata's capture and return, dead or alive. Such a morally offensive offer is tantamount to a solicitation to kidnap or commit murder; it also violates the sovereignty of Cuba as well as international law."

> **If there is a place terrorists can call home, it is the United States.**

In a statement published in the fall 1998 *CovertAction Quarterly*, Ratner offers examples of the U.S. government's hypocrisy, "If there is a place terrorists can call home, it is the United States." Among other fugitives, Ratner cites: Emmanuel Constant, former head of the Haitian paramilitary organization FRAPH, which was responsible for the torture and murder of hundreds following the 1991 coup; General Hector Gramajo, accused of killing 10,000 Guatemalan Indians; and, Sintong Panjaitan, an Indonesian general who was responsible for the 1991 Santa Cruz massacre in East Timor that killed hundreds.

Lumumba Van deli of the "Hands Off Assata Campaign" told *Sojourner*, "Assata is very concerned as anyone would be with a $100,000 bounty on their head." Van deli added, "She is relying on folks here to step up pressure on the U.S. government." Shakur has also been calling for freedom for other political prisoners, including Mumia Abu-Jamal, now on death row in Pennyslvania, and her codefendant Sundiata Acoli.

### What you can do:

Write to Christine Whitman to express your disagreement with her actions: Governor Christine Todd Whitman, State of New Jersey, CN-001, Trenton, NJ 08625.

Write your Representatives and Senators to express your disagreement with Congressional Resolution #254 and ask them to vote against it if introduced in the new congressional session.

Write to Fidel Castro to show your support for his protection of Shakur and other political prisoners: President Fidel Castro, c/o Cuban Interests Section, 2630 16th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20009; fax: (202) 797-8521; e-mail: cubaseccion@igc.org.

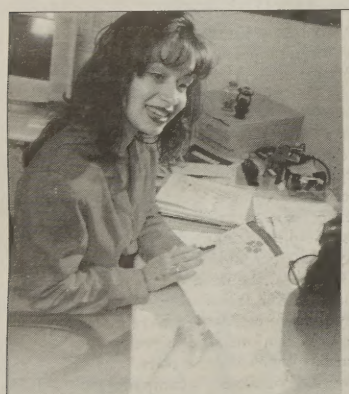
### For more information:

Hands Off Assata Campaign:
P.O. Box 380058, Brooklyn, NY 11238
Tel: (212) 561-0912

The AfroCuba website provides up to date information on Shakur's case:
P.O. Box 1054, Arlington, MA 02474-0020
E-mail: main@afrocubaweb.com
Website: www.afrocubaweb.com

Out of Control is the Lesbian Committee to Support Women Political Prisoners. They publish: *Out of Time*, 3543 18th Street, Box 30, San Francisco, CA 94110
E-mail: outoftime@igc.org

*Genevieve Howe is a political activist living in Boston. This article was based in part on information found in* CovertAction Quarterly *(Fall 1998) and on the AfroCuba website and on statements written by Assata Shakur.*

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# Fighting Gender Apartheid Under The Taliban

## New Campaigns to Free Women in Afghanistan Gain Ground

photo © Physicians for Human Rights

*Not permitted to talk to foreign aid workers inside, Afghan women wait for hours hoping to obtain humanitarian assistance.*

By Genevieve Howe

On September 27, 1996, when the extremist Islamic Taliban took over the Afghanistan capital of Kabul, women and girls were stripped of virtually every right. For nearly two and a half years now, they have been living essentially under house arrest. Women are severely beaten, sometimes to death, if they break harsh gender apartheid laws. While fleeing the country remains the primary form of resistance for Afghan women, new campaigns to free the women are gaining ground in the United States and internationally. Physicians for Human Rights recently released a new report on conditions for Afghan women, documenting the results of a three-month study led by Afghan-born public health researcher Zohra Rasekh. In addition, the Feminist Majority Foundation's "Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan Campaign" has been working to pressure the United States government to help free Afghan women, and has won some recent victories in the struggle to increase international solidarity on behalf of the women.

### A Virtual Ban on Women

Released in August of 1998, the report by Physicians for Human Rights on the "Taliban's War on Women" documents horrifying and systematic discrimination against women in Afghanistan. As the report states, "The extent to which the Taliban regime has threatened the human rights of Afghan women is unparalleled in recent history." These abuses seriously "undermine the health and well-being of Afghan women."

As the report details, women and girls in Afghanistan cannot work or go to school. They cannot leave their homes unless accompanied by a close male relative. They must wear a "burqa"—a cloth that completely shrouds the body leaving only a small patch of mesh for seeing and breathing. Homes where women live must have their windows painted to assure that no one can see the women inside. Male doctors are prohibited from examining women patients without a chaperone. Women are forbidden from wearing white socks or shoes (the color of the Taliban flag) and their shoes cannot make noise when they walk.

The Taliban Police administer regular, brutal beatings for such offenses as baring an ankle or wrist or for violating any of these laws. Since women cannot earn their own money, those without economic support from men must beg in the streets. The number of destitute women is rising, and include many of the 30,000 women who were widowed when the Soviet Union invaded in 1979 and then occupied the country, and through the subsequent civil war. The ban on women working has also left tens of thousands of families impoverished. In addition, since July of 1997 women have been prohibited from picking up food or other aid from distribution centers unless accompanied by a male relative.

Only one primitive hospital in the country is available to women, and many women have died in childbirth because they lack access to medical care. At the state orphanage in the capital of Kabul, the girls have not been allowed outside since September 1996.

Prior to the Taliban's takeover, women played a prominent role in Afghan society. Forty percent of doctors and most of the pediatricians were women. Women accounted for 70 percent of school teachers. Half of all civilian government employees were women, as were half of the Kabul University students. Women also worked as lawyers, judges, engineers, and nurses. They did not hide themselves with burqas. Practically overnight, the Taliban destroyed participation of women in the country.

### Foreign Intervention and U.S. Interests

War has been raging in Afghanistan since the Soviet Union invaded in 1979. By the time the Soviet-installed communist government collapsed in 1992, at least one million people had been killed in the fighting and more than six million had fled to the neighboring countries of Pakistan and Iran, among others. The *mujaheddin* ("freedom fighter") movement took over and declared Islamic law to be the governing law of the country. Over the next several years, Islamic factions continued to fight for control of the capital of Kabul, until the Taliban finally overpowered all other forces on September 27, 1996. A now weak group called the Northern Alliance, supported by Iran, continues to battle the Taliban.

The Taliban emerged as a political and military force in 1994 under the leadership of a 31-year-old religious leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar. Taliban means "students of Muslim religions studies" and is largely made up of minimally educated, rural Pashtun youth who were recruited from refugee camps and religious schools in Pakistan. The government of Pakistan continues to support the Taliban—and is even considering passing some gender apartheid laws in its own country. Economic aid from Saudi Arabia and profits from heroin trafficking are the largest sources of income for the Taliban, which now controls about 90 percent of Afghanistan.

According to Eleanor Smeal, president of the Feminist Majority Foundation, the United States supported the *mujaheddin* and supported the Taliban until pressure from women's and human rights groups forced the U.S. to stop recognizing the Taliban as legitimate leaders of Afghanistan in late 1997. The United Nations has refused to recognize the Taliban and has reserved Afghanistan's seat for Najibullah, the last communist leader. The World Health Organization, UNICEF, UNESCO, and the UN food program will not work in Afghanistan until women and girls are given back their human rights.

### Documenting the Psychological and Physical Toll

After two and a half years of crushing repression that prevents women and girls from ever being exposed to sunlight or seeing anything out of doors except through the thick fibers of their burqas, the Taliban's edicts are taking a considerable toll on the psychological and physical health of some 11.5 million women and girls.

The report by Physicians for Human Rights uses information gathered from three months of interviews with women in Afghanistan and in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan to document this toll. Of the 160 women interviewed, 71 percent said their physical health had declined. Of the 40 women interviewed in-depth, 35 women said they had less access to medical care. More than half of the group cited occasions when they were seriously ill and could not seek medical care. Among the most tragic findings are that 97 percent exhibited signs of major depression and that 21 percent thought of suicide "quite often" or "extremely often."

One of the women interviewed by Physicians for Human Rights was mourning the loss of her twenty-year-old daughter. The young woman had experienced stomach pains for several days but could not go to the doctor because she had no burqa. Another participant in the study related the story of her elderly aunt who was caught with an ankle showing. The Taliban police beat her with a metal cable until her ankle broke. Another woman who had lost her husband in the war and her job to the Taliban was struggling to survive and feed her child. She told researchers, "I lost my income, my future and almost my sanity."

### The "Stop Gender Apartheid Campaign"

The Feminist Majority Foundation launched the "Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan Campaign" in early 1997. "When we first heard about this, we could hardly believe it," foundation president Eleanor Smeal told *Sojourner*. The more the group investigated the daily horror of women's lives in Afghanistan, the greater their commitment to "freeing the women" became. "Time is of the essence," said Smeal, because "worse and worse stories keep coming out. The edicts keep growing in number and severity."

Smeal added, "This is not Islamic law. This is not religious. It is not cultural. It is a *crime*. Nowhere does it say that women cannot have access to healthcare or education. . . .This really is a dictatorship that has imposed gross rules."

The Feminist Majority Foundation's campaign aims to educate the public and pressure the United States government to help free Afghan women. "This has to be put on a higher agenda," said Smeal. "We feel these women need to be rescued and that all diplomatic means need to be used to free them." Smeal, who has been a feminist leader in the United States since the early 1970s, added, "If all of the feminist movements don't do something for these women, who will we do something for?"

The Campaign recently received $100,000 from Jay and Mavis Leno. Mavis Leno also testified about the abuse of women by the Taliban before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee last March.

One of the most important victories claimed by the "Stop Gender Apartheid Campaign" is the recent abandonment of a multi-billion dollar pipeline project in Afghanistan by petroleum

*Continued on page 16*

# Fifty Years Later—

## A Small Victory For Pregnant Women Subjected to Radiation Experiment

By Genevieve Howe

Hundreds of pregnant women who had been subjected to radiation experiments in the 1940s finally received a small measure of justice last August. After four years of litigation, a federal judge awarded $10.3 million to women and their children who were unknowing recipients of a radioactive cocktail between September 1945 and May 1947.

The 829 pregnant women were lured to Vanderbilt University's Pre-Natal Clinic in Nashville, Tennessee by promises that they could have their babies delivered for under $20. The women were mostly working class and all white; like many other hospitals at the time, the clinic refused to treat women of color.

In exchange for an inexpensive delivery, the women agreed to participate in a nutrition study, but what they did not know was that their diet included a dose of a radioactive drink. That part of the study aimed to determine maternal needs for iron by tracing how much of the iron administered was absorbed by the fetus. Vanderbilt University researcher Dr. Paul Hahn promoted the idea of using radioactive iron so that the iron contained in the cocktail could be distinguished from other iron the mothers consumed. The Rockefeller Foundation funded the study.

The class action lawsuit was filed by Emma Craft, one of four mothers in the study whose children died of cancer. Lead attorney Donald Arbitblit, of the San Francisco and New York law firm Lieff, Cabraser, Heimann & Bernstein, described the 77-year-old Emma Craft as a "folk hero." He told *Sojourner*, "She rose to heights she never imagined necessary. She proved her point and got an apology from a very recalcitrant university."

For years, Vanderbilt maintained that the study was in the best interest of pregnant women who wanted to avoid anemia, insisted that the women had been informed about the study, and rejected the notion that any of the four children had died as a result of the radioactive iron.

Arbitblit described lead researcher Hahn as "overzealous," and said that "he should have known of the risks" of administering radioactive iron.

According to Geoffrey Sea, a radiation injury expert who worked on behalf of Emma Craft and the other plaintiffs, there was no real need for the study. "The results didn't add much to what they already knew [about pre-natal iron needs] based on animal studies," said Sea.

Follow-up research conducted in the 1960s by the Atomic Energy Commission and the U.S. Public Health Service revealed that at least three of the four cancer deaths were attributable to the radioactive iron—and that none of the children in the study's control group had died of cancer. Neither the original study nor the follow-up study examined health effects on the mothers.

> In exchange for an inexpensive delivery, the women agreed to participate in a nutrition study, but what they did not know was that their diet included a dose of a radioactive drink.

Despite efforts on the part of Geoffrey Sea and others going back to the early 1980s, the mainstream press never mentioned the Vanderbilt experiment until late 1993. A series of Pulitzer Prize winning articles by Eileen Wellsome about human radiation experiments appeared in the *Albuquerque* (NM) *Tribune* in the fall of 1993. The articles triggered the U.S. Energy Department to announce that it would investigate several of the 1940s experiments. These events prompted the *Nashville Tennessean* to publicize the Vanderbilt experiment. Upon reading about the experiment in the Tennessee paper, Emma Craft and a handful of other women immediately realized that they must have been among the research subjects.

Only about 400 of the more than 1600 women and children identified themselves before the claims period expired in August. "The great majority of women in the experiment," said Geoffrey Sea, "never found out they participated."

Vanderbilt lost most of the women's records and a number of the women are now dead, according to Sea. The only ones who benefited from the settlement were those who responded to newspaper notices inviting women who may have been given the radioactive cocktails to identify themselves.

Emma Craft received $1 million for the wrongful death of her 11-year-old daughter Carolyn from cancer. The other injured parties received about $10,000 to $11,000 each. Vanderbilt University was required to pay $9.1 million and the Rockefeller Foundation has contributed $900,000. The remaining $325,000 came from prior settlements with other parties.

In response to the judge's decision for the plaintiffs, Emma Craft said, "Nothing can bring Carolyn back to me. Since I found out about the experiment, I have been reliving her death every day. I wanted Vanderbilt to apologize, and now they have apologized."

*Genevieve Howe is a political activist living in Boston.*

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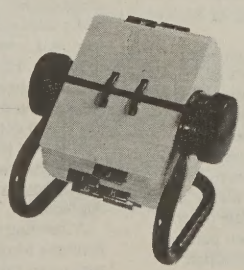

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# Rape and Retaliation:

## Sexual Abuse of Women in U.S. Prisons

By Silja J.A. Talvi

Human Rights Watch has been investigating abuses of human rights throughout the world for over twenty years. Until this past October, no governmental agency had ever dared to try to force the New York-based organization to reveal confidential research information. But two months ago, the Michigan Department of Corrections (DOC) attempted to do just that by serving a subpoena to gain access to Human Rights Watch's research into sexual harassment and rape in Michigan women's prisons.

Beginning in 1994, Human Rights Watch began to look into concerns that women incarcerated in Michigan state prisons were being subjected to egregious invasions of privacy, verbal and physical abuse, coerced sexual relationships, and rape by male prison guards, who constitute over half of the correctional staff overseeing an estimated 2,000 women.

In 1995, following investigation by Human Rights Watch that revealed a definitive pattern of sexual abuse within the prison system, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) launched its own investigation into the treatment of women prisoners in Michigan. Alarmed by its findings, the DOJ later joined a prisoner class action suit against the Michigan DOC. The case, which is expected to go to trial in 1999, focuses on allegations that the Michigan DOC failed to prevent sexual abuse and failed to intervene to halt retaliatory actions against those prisoners who have reported violations of their civil and human rights.

It was an emphasis on the latter, that of retaliatory attacks, that led Human Rights Watch to release "Nowhere to Hide: Retaliations Against Women in Michigan State Prisons" in September 1998. According to Widney Brown, a lawyer and researcher with the Women's Rights Division of Human Rights Watch, the DOC's subpoena for confidential research information came right on the heels of "Nowhere to Hide." Human Rights Watch is fighting the subpoena with the assistance of the American Civil Liberties Union of Michigan.

"Michigan keeps saying that they have a zero-tolerance policy [regarding sexual abuse of prisoners], but our finding is that they don't. The women report that the atmosphere is incredibly sexualized—that the [male guards] feel like they can have any inmate they want," said Brown.

### Guards Go Unpunished

In other states, and in federal prisons as well, guards accused of sexual abuse are often left unpunished. In March, the U.S. Bureau of Prisons (BOP) settled with three women who had been imprisoned in a male Security Housing Unit at a Dublin, California prison. The three women had alleged that they had been brutally sexually assaulted, beaten, and sold by guards to male inmates as sex slaves. Two of the women continue to be held in federal prison. The remaining woman, Robin Lucas, has emerged from her experience emotionally and physically traumatized, and now feels compelled to speak out against the widespread sexual abuse of incarcerated women.

Geri Lynn Green, one of the attorneys representing the women, explained that the monetary settlement was insignificant in comparison to these women's primary concerns. "All they wanted was to be made safe . . . and to have the guards and staff members punished for their behavior." While the BOP did agree to certain reforms within the prison system, the U.S. Attorney's Office decided against prosecuting any of the prison staff.

While Green says that the BOP has complied with the requirement to institute certain reforms into the national training program for new and current employees, she also complains that the BOP has stopped short of implementing a confidential, reliable reporting mechanism in order to protect women from retaliatory attacks by guards.

Todd Craig, Chief Spokesman for the Central Office of the Bureau of Prisons in Washington D.C., explained that the "bottom line is that there is a new plan to prevent these kinds of problems, and the BOP is committed to those reforms."

Alluding to existing procedures whereby women can report abuse to the prison warden or to a new hotline staffed by the Office of the Inspector General, Craig emphasized that ten prison employees were disciplined last year for sexual misconduct, and seven were criminally prosecuted. "That is not indicative of an agency that turns a blind eye." Nevertheless, Craig could not offer a definitive statement on the confidentiality of complaints made by inmates regarding sexual misconduct.

### California Prisons and Abuse in Isolation Units

Amnesty International's recently launched, U.S.-focused "Rights for All" campaign has also placed renewed emphasis on the issue of sexual coercion and abuse of women prisoners, including those imprisoned in California's Valley State Prison for Women. California, which holds the largest number of incarcerated women in the U.S., is home to the world's two largest women's prisons, the Central California Women's Facility and Valley State Prison in Chowchilla. As in many other parts of the country, the majority of correctional staff are men.

Since June, California Prison Focus (CPF) and two other San Francisco-based organizations, California Coalition for Women Prisoners and Legal Services for Prisoners with Children, have focused their efforts on charges of intimidation and sexual abuse at Valley State Prison's isolation units, which are called Security Housing Units, or SHUs.

According to Rick Allen, Public Information Officer at Valley State Prison, there are currently 44 inmates housed in the SHU unit, out of a total institutional count of 3,729 female inmates.

Unlike temporary solitary confinement for bad behavior, inmates in SHUs are often housed in the isolation cells for extended periods of time. While prison officials explain that SHUs help to keep the rest of the prison safe from threatening or violent inmates, Michelle Foy, co-chair of the Valley State Committee of CPF, believes that SHUs are used to punish prisoners who dare to speak out. "We've found that they target prisoners who litigate, prisoners who challenge unjust policies and human rights abuses within the prison system."

Earlier this year, women prisoners at Valley State Prison had filed a joint 602, an internal complaint, alleging sexual misconduct and abuse by numerous correctional officers. Subsequent interviews by CPF found that the women were complaining of daily mistreatment by guards, including improper touching, verbal harassment, leering at women in the showers, and sexual assault.

Facing pressure from prisoner advocacy organizations, the California Department of Corrections (CSC) launched an internal investigation into the allegations. Terry Thornton, a spokesperson for the CDC, stated that "after interviewing between 18 and 24 women . . . the bulk of the allegations were [found to be] either untrue or exaggerated . . . but a couple of the allegations our Office of Internal Affairs is actively investigating."

Foy says that guards who have been accused of sexual abuse are still in positions where they can have regular physical contact with their alleged victims. Other than one staff member who was moved prior to the investigation, Allen confirms that he is "not aware of any other staff changes relevant to the investigation."

Thornton downplays concerns that women in SHUs are subject to sexual abuse. "Because of the design and number of staff assigned to the SHU, any misconduct by any staff member would be observed by other staff and inmates."

But Foy stresses that women imprisoned in SHUs are held in lockdown 23 hours a day, in small cells with steel doors. "The basis of SHUs is isolation: minimal contact between prisoners and contact with the outside."

In this way, Foy argues, SHU isolation works to the clear disadvantage of female inmates. "If a guard does something to a woman, there are no other prisoners to witness that. Things happen in really isolated situations. There's plenty of room for them to get away with this stuff. And they do."

*Silja J.A. Talvi is a Seattle-based writer with a master's degree in women studies. An excerpt from this article first appeared in* In These Times.

# Good-Bye, Cree

## Boston community mourns another victim of domestic violence

By Loie Hayes

Determined, energetic, optimistic, playful, passionate. Suddenly dead on November 15. Creziel "Cree" Grandison: mother, daughter, teacher, student, and friend. Not dead from old age or disease. Dead from saying "no" to the father of her two youngest kids. Dead because a restraining order is not enough protection from a man who would rather kill you and himself than see the end of a relationship. Shot dead by the man she'd loved for five years.

Children's songs and gospel standards covered the sounds of weeping during the memorial service held December 6 in Boston's Jamaica Plain neighborhood. Organized by the teachers at the day care center where Cree had worked for four years, it ended with a cluster of preschoolers placing flowers in a vase beside her smiling brown face in a picture frame. Her oldest son, Rhondell, age seven, lingered near the flowers, while his four-year-old brother, Gee-Quawn, and two-year-old sister, Jenasia, clung to the laps of their grandmother and other family members.

One of her co-teachers, Maggie Cousineau, described Cree at the memorial service:

*Cree had lots and lots of energy. She danced with the kids in the late afternoons and taught them the words to the latest tunes. She played football and baseball and slid down the slide,*

*Continued on next page*

*Cree Grandison*

*Continued from previous page*

*bandaged knees, and made sure shoes were tied and that everyone at least tried to do their own zipper. Her world revolved around her babies. She braided their hair and told them stories. She was a strong, independent woman. Cree's smile was wide and often mischievous. You knew you'd been had when she'd laugh and say, 'Girl, you are so gullible!' Unlike her hairstyles which changed as often as our weather, Cree's goals for herself and her children never wavered. She wanted to complete her education, buy a home for her children, and have lots of fun along the way.*

Cree was an optimistic 24-year-old when she died. She knew of the threat to her and had reassured her mother: "We'll be all right." Her death leaves a hole in the fabric she so determinedly held together: her family and friends most profoundly, plus the day care community of working- and middle-class folks, African Americans, whites, Latinos and Asians, and the Wheelock College community where she was studying early childhood education. Many were angered when Boston's establishment newspaper, the *Boston Globe*, quoted Boston police blaming Cree's murder on her failure to extend the temporary restraining order she had taken out against her boyfriend in late October. As a letter to the editor pointed out,

*If this [police] contention weren't such a shocking example of blaming the victim, it would be laughable. First of all, there may have been any number of reasons why Grandison didn't appear at the follow-up hearing [to extend the restraining order], including the possibility that she feared [her boyfriend's] reaction to further legal action against him. Second, and most important, even if she had pursued the matter, can anyone really believe it would have made a difference? A person willing to risk the consequences of committing murder is unlikely to be concerned about the consequences of violating a restraining order. The police, and the* Globe, *which did not provide any dissenting opinion from domestic violence experts, have done an injustice to Creziel Grandison.*

> ***She danced with the kids in the late afternoons and taught them the words to the latest tunes.***
>
> *— Co-teacher, Maggie Cousineau*

Family Advocates, a group that works with battered women at the Dimock and Codman Square Health Centers, organized a candlelight vigil in Cree's home neighborhood of Dorchester on December 10 to celebrate her life, and to add to the chorus shouting "no more." In addition to a speakout featuring Cree's family and friends, clergy, and domestic violence activists, the evening included a celebration of the birthdays of Gee-Quawn and Jenasia with balloons and gifts for them and for Cree's oldest son, Rhondell.

Friends have established a trust fund to support Cree's children. Donations may be sent to the Grandison Children's Trust Fund, Citizen's Bank, 696 Centre Street, Jamaica Plain, MA 02130.

*Loie Hayes is the parent of two children at Bright Beginnings, the day care center where Cree Grandison worked.*


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# Fifty Plus! What About Us?

## HIV/AIDS and Aging

photo © Marilyn Humphries

*Dorothea Manuela (left) and Ruth Hines (right) talk about safe sex.*

By Diana Laskin Siegal

Nationally, 11 percent of people with AIDS are over the age of fifty, and the numbers are increasing. Florida has already reached 14 percent. While these numbers are themselves alarming, we know that AIDS and HIV infection remain undiagnosed in many older people. Why is this the case? Well, for one thing, weakness, fatigue, and dementia may be symptoms of AIDS that are dismissed in older people because they are incorrectly thought to be signs of "normal" aging. Autopsies have shown that some people thought to have Alzheimer's disease actually had AIDS dementia. In one study, 8 percent of the older people who died from unspecified causes were HIV positive.

In other words, if we are to effectively treat older people with HIV or AIDS, and work to prevent infection, our work is cut out for us. We have to get out the message that older people *do* contract HIV/AIDS, and that they do so just like anyone else, from activities that cause blood, semen, and vaginal secretions to be transmitted from one person to another. We must also develop strategies for dealing with the stresses of caregivers who are themselves older or caring for older infected people.

These were among the critical issues discussed November 6 at "50 Plus! What About Us—HIV and Aging," a Boston community forum chaired by Barbara Gomes-Beach, executive director of the Multicultural AIDS Coalition. About 50 people living with HIV/AIDS and staff from agencies serving the Boston area attended this first conference on HIV/AIDS and older people held at the People's Baptist Church.

### Challenging Assumptions, Breaking Silences

Society's general ageism often contributes to the avoidance by providers and the public of the subject of HIV/AIDS in older persons. Health care providers rarely ask elders about sexual practices and other behaviors that increase their risk of contracting the virus. There have been few educational campaigns directed at older people and their pictures are never included in materials showing the many faces of AIDS. At the same time, ageism fosters the false assumption that older people already know the facts and don't need education. One woman at the conference reported that her 85-year-old father, who is sexually active, lacked safe sex information until she provided him with it.

In addition to the general denial that older people are sexually active, ageism also prevents providers from discussing safe needle use with elders even though they have become infected, for example, by sharing needles used for vitamin or insulin injections, tattoos, and blood glucose testing.

An AIDS educator at the conference explained that most programs and health care workers ignore the realities that seniors use drugs and practice unsafe sex. He reported that sex workers go to senior housing each month when the social security checks arrive. Further, a woman who does outreach to sex workers said that the women who identify themselves as professional sex workers insist on condom use, but many women new to the streets, or addicted women selling sex to pay for drugs, usually do not.

In addition, the increased sexual activity of older men because of Viagra is of great concern. Men who take Viagra should receive education about STDs including HIV.

### Older Women and HIV/AIDS

HIV/AIDS affects older women in many ways—because they are infected, are caring for others with the disease (such as their infected adult offspring), or are caring for their grandchildren who have been orphaned by the disease. Yet, the stigma of HIV/AIDS is still so great that one participant told people her daughter had cancer because she didn't want her grandchildren to be shunned. Since older people have not been educated about the disease, problems have arisen in senior housing when occupants find out someone in the building has AIDS or has a relative with AIDS.

Older women also confront the assumption that long-time married people are monogamous and have no need for information about safe sex. Health providers never ask older people, especially women who may remind them of their grandmothers, whether they know how to put on a condom, or how to have safe oral sex. In addition to ageism, cultural issues also mitigate against open discussion of sexuality. Many cultures don't permit women to discuss sex with their husbands and make it virtually impossible for women to insist that their husbands use condoms even when they know the men are not monogamous.

> Health providers never ask older people, especially women who may remind them of their grandmothers, whether they know how to put on a condom, or how to have safe oral sex.

Many midlife and older women don't know their risk factors and think that because they cannot get pregnant after menopause, they are "safe." They are thinking only about pregnancy and not about protecting themselves from STDs.

### Conference Recommendations

Three conference work groups developed recommendations on prevention and education, treatment, and caregiving. The prevention and education work group stressed the need to deal with individual and community denial, to develop appropriate messages and programs to reach older people, and to train physician and other health care workers to more effectively educate and treat elders. Agencies and programs were urged to do what they can within their existing budgets, to develop collaborations with other agencies, and to look for new funds. They were encouraged to include interested older people in the planning. As Mary Marino, living with HIV since 1987, said, "People need to be educated that it can happen to them."

The treatment group noted the importance of both alternative and conventional therapies. They also discussed the importance of training older people themselves to reach out to and help their peers. As one person living with AIDS said, "People are touched by how much you care, not by how much you know." According to conference participants, appropriate places to make contact with the older population include churches, barber shops and beauty parlors, waiting rooms, senior centers and housing complexes, home settings for the housebound, veterans groups, singles groups, bereavement groups, and travel agencies where people traveling abroad can be reached.

The caregiving group reported on two research projects conducted by Cynthia Cannon Poindexter, Boston University School of Social Work, and Mary Ellen Yates, Spectrum Health and Education Associates of Newton. Their research showed that grief, lack of support, and the continuing stigma of AIDS make the responsibilities of the caregivers very difficult. The importance, strength, and resiliency of the caregivers were also acknowledged. The group's recommendations included finding ways to reduce the stigma, increasing caregivers' social networks, and providing health care and insurance coverage for caregivers who often have to leave their own jobs because of their burdens.

The call to mobilize further was heard by the planning committee which sees this conference as only the beginning of its activities. For more information, or for materials for the public or professionals, contact Jacqueline E.F. Walker, Multicultural AIDS Coalition, 801-B Tremont Street, Boston, MA 02118. (617) 442-1622.

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*Diana Laskin Siegal is the co-author of* The New Ourselves, Growing Older: Women Aging with Knowledge and Power *(Simon & Schuster, 1994). She has written other materials on HIV/AIDS and older women for AARP and (with Christie Burke) a chapter titled "Midlife and Older Women and HIV/AIDS: My (Grand)mother Wouldn't Do That" in* The Gender Politics of HIV/AIDS in Women *(New York University Press, 1997).*

### Other Resources:

The Massachusetts Health Research Institute (now renamed Third Sector Solutions) funded the Mass. Association of Council on Aging and Senior Center Directors (MCOA) to develop a brochure and training curriculum specifically for seniors. (617) 357-5880

A video by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), "HIV/AIDS: It Can Happen to Me," was shown at the conference. AARP is one of the few organizations that has produced materials about HIV/AIDS in older people, especially in older women. Available from AARP, 601 E Street, NW, Washington, DC 20049. (202) 434-2277

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# Mirror Images

*"Dana and I never really knew each other. Because from the moment we understood ourselves to be lesbian and Black in a racist and homophobic culture, we had put on our masks."*

By Evelyn C. White

Lately, I've had cause to reflect on the public images of Black lesbians and how they affect the emotional contours of our lives. Black lesbians are rarely what we appear to be on the surface. Taught in a racist and homophobic culture that it is not safe to reveal our authentic selves, we have learned, in the words of Black poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, to "wear the mask." While White lesbians may have the luxury of greeting their initial attraction to women independent of the experience of being discriminated against, Black lesbians sense the need to defend themselves against the perceptions of others from the start, and so we don whatever masks we feel will protect us in a doubly hostile world. This masking is a survival technique that has served to protect us from our oppressors and helped us to maintain bonds within the African-American community. It has also helped to foster distortions about our identity that often keep us in a struggle with ourselves and with other Black women.

My first clear understanding of this came shortly after the death of the poet Pat Parker, a woman I greatly admired, though I was sometimes perplexed about her methods. By every measure, Parker was a force in the Black lesbian community. I knew Pat Parker slightly. We both lived in the San Francisco Bay area, and we would run into each other at concerts, readings, sporting events. Of course, I knew of her exquisite poetry, especially *Jonestown and Other Madness* and its haunting refrain: "Black folks do not, Black folks do not, Black folks do not commit suicide."

The general sentiment in our community was that if there was any kind of fracas involving Black lesbians, Parker was likely to be involved, if not the ringleader. Indeed, everybody knew that Parker had a wild, crazy, iconoclastic, nonconformist, kick-ass streak. She let it all hang out. That was the image that coexisted with Parker's reputation as a masterful and mesmerizing poet.

I heard about her breast cancer diagnosis in 1987, just as I was beginning to compile *The Black Woman's Health Book*. I had always planned to include a piece of Parker's writing in the collection. When she died in 1989, I decided that, if possible, I wanted to find a previously unpublished piece by Parker. I wanted something in the book that would honor her legacy as a pioneering Black lesbian writer.

I contacted Parker's literary executor and arranged to visit Parker's house to go through her papers. Parker lived in a tree-lined suburb outside Oakland in a neighborhood resplendent with ranch houses and well-tended lawns. When I pulled into her driveway, I immediately thought: *This is just like "The Brady Bunch." Who would believe that Parker, hellion that she was, would live in such a staid mom-and-pop community?* There was an even stronger "Leave It to Beaver" vibration inside the house: school pictures of Parker's daughter, Anastasia, in the living room, a coffee maker in the kitchen, neatly hung potholders and grocery coupons under colorful magnets on the refrigerator.

The literary executor directed me to Parker's writing studio, a wood-paneled room off the kitchen. When I walked in, I stopped in my tracks, dumbfounded. There was not a stray paper clip, crumpled-up piece of paper, dog-eared book or ink-stained pad in sight. The room was such a contrast to the reputation that Parker had had on the street that it was difficult, in that moment, to reconcile the two. I diplomatically asked the executor if Parker had gone through some kind of pre-death, get-your-house-in-order, going-to-meet-your-Maker transformation that would explain the fastidiousness I saw. "Not at all," the woman replied matter-of-factly. "Pat Parker was very, very organized."

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I am still weeping about my friendship with Dana. I weep because part of my soul was lost in the aftermath of lying naked with another Black woman. And I know that my pain, in varying shades and degrees, has been experienced by multitudes of other Black lesbians.

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The woman left. I spent the afternoon in the room perusing Parker's papers, journals and files and marveling at how different the woman I was discovering had been from her public persona. The private Pat Parker seemed far more thoughtful, meticulous, caring. One of my most vivid memories of that day is of the file folder labeled Anastasia. Carefully placed in annotated, chronological order were the report cards, health records and crayon drawings of Parker's child. Scanning the wall-length bookshelf, I realized that Parker's hundreds of books were in alphabetical order by author. *She must have been a Virgo,* I thought, still unable to reconcile the calm serenity of this room with my memories of Parker in a grass-stained softball uniform, flirting, fronting, intimidating people as she downed whiskey at the local bar. But the fact is, contrary to her public image, Parker (who was an Aquarius) had created and clearly thrived in a quiet, peaceful, orderly sanctuary. She did not just raise hell.

As I left her home (with the previously unpublished poem "Massage") and drove back to the city, I was mindful of the difference between real Black lesbian life and the images many of our friends, families and co-workers have of us. I thought about the misconceptions people might have about me, and how necessary it is for me to speak the truth about who I really am. For in the absence of speaking the truth, Black lesbians risk the pain of being misread, of having our silences—and our bluster—distorted, demonized and misunderstood. We will be misunderstood by our oppressors, who in the words of Audre Lorde, "never meant for us to survive," and perhaps, more painfully, by our mirror reflections.

Memories of my afternoon in Parker's study have been pivotal as I have struggled to heal from a painful exchange with another Black woman that evolved from a deep and complex place of silence. Dana (not her real name) was a new friend, a woman I'd met, with whom there appeared to be mutual sexual energy and attraction. We were two Black women delighted to befriend each other. We met for dinner. We went to the theater. But mostly, we had many long and laughter-filled conversations during which we shared stories about our lives.

For instance, I told Dana, as odd as it might sound, that I'd made a vow to never make love with a Black lesbian who had not read *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker's magnificent novel about a tyrannized Black southern woman who, with the loving guidance of another Black woman, finds her own power and strength. I figured a sister who had yet to read this story of female affirmation might be struggling with issues of self-love that I would find cautionary in an intimate relationship. In later conversations, during which Dana spoke quite emotionally about some of her interactions with Black women, I was led to believe that she understood why I had taken my *Color Purple* stance.

Several months later, Dana and I slept together for the first time. For me, the encounter was confusing. "I want to make you angry," she said repeatedly as we flailed on her bed. Deeply disturbing, her words were an unheeded warning that we should not have been intimate in those moments, and for my error in judgment, I take full responsibility.

The next morning, overwrought and completely drained by the intensity of our encounter, I still tried to connect with Dana in a meaningful way before I left her apartment. It was not easy. Much to my dismay, I found myself reengaged in the drama of the previous night. Dana, wearing a white terry-cloth robe, pulled me toward her for a farewell kiss after I made it clear that I absolutely had to leave. As I attempted to move out of her rough embrace, she grasped my right arm, locked her eyes with mine and said: "Guess what? I've never read *The Color Purple*. I haven't seen the movie either." Tossing her head back, she began to laugh maniacally.

In my rising despair and exhaustion, Dana's words hit me like an assassin's bullet. Although I remained upright, my spirit was crushed by the willful cruelty of the blow, and I collapsed emotionally like a rag doll. Then, calling forth all the self-love and compassion that I could, I returned Dana's gaze and replied, "Well, you probably intend to." I turned and walked out.

Dana's derisive laughter trailed me down the corridor as she stood, leaning against the doorway. I was so shattered by the incident, I feared I would keel over while waiting for the elevator. I realized I felt battered, not by the fact that Dana claimed never to have read *The Color Purple*, but by the fact that she had reached back to what I had seen as an occasion

of shared intimacy, wielding it as a weapon intended to wound me. But why the desire to inflict pain in the first place? What in our relationship had left Dana wanting to lash out at me? Holding the banister for support, I descended the four flights of stairs in a numb swirl. When I arrived home, I ripped off my clothes and ran a hot bath. I sat in the tub for hours and sobbed.

I am still weeping about my friendship with Dana. I weep because part of my soul was lost in the aftermath of lying naked with another Black woman. And I know that my pain, in varying shades and degrees, has been experienced by multitudes of other Black lesbians, including tough-talking women like Pat Parker and, I am certain, Dana herself. I believe the loss is connected, in tangible ways, to the silences we keep about who we really are and the depth of our vulnerabilities.

Thinking back to my afternoon in Pat Parker's study, and my discovery of how different Parker's core spirit had seemed from the bluster and bravado she showed to the world, it suddenly became clear to me that Dana and I never really knew each other. Because from the moment we understood ourselves to be lesbian and Black in a racist and homophobic culture, we had put on our masks. No doubt we began by believing that we could wear the mask when it served us and take it off when we chose. But for Dana and me, as for too many Black lesbians, the habit of hiding had become second-nature. As a result, Dana and I stayed trapped inside our silences, never managing to put aside our masks and show our most vulnerable selves to each other.

Indeed, because of silences, Dana had misread me, astoundingly, as a woman scheming to toy with her emotions. I only realized this later, when I recalled one of our lengthy, freewheeling, late-night conversations. I remembered Dana had referred to me as a "Don Juana." I did not then, nor do I now, have the slightest idea what she was talking about. For a seductress I am decidedly not. I can barely watch a love scene in a movie without blushing with embarrassment. I am by nature a very private, quiet and delicate person, especially with regard to sexual expression.

Still I somehow suspect that because of my writing achievements and my so-called prominence in the Black lesbian community, Dana got the impression that I was a lady-slaying Mack Daddy. But while I knew her "Don Juana" remark was completely off the mark, I stayed silent, neglecting to assure her that my intention towards her, my admiration for her, were warmly sincere. And my silence led to additional silences and secrets on both our parts that culminated in a tumultuous sexual encounter that left me with feelings of humiliation that I doubt I will ever fully resolve.

What I do know is that, for now, the thought of being intimate with another Black woman gives me pause. And I know that, among Black lesbians, I am not alone in this feeling. And so I share this saga, pitiful as it is, in an effort to keep faith with myself and my Black lesbian sisters. I know now how easily Black women are misunderstood and how often our silences get misread as coldness or ego-tripping. The truth is that many of us are silent because we are shy, sensitive, fragile and afraid. There were many times during the course of my friendship with Dana that I felt so exposed and vulnerable that I could hardly speak. Contrary to the damning stereotype about us as strong and invincible Rocks of Gibraltar who can endure any burden and withstand any pain, I believe that most Black lesbians are deeply wounded. As poet June Jordan aptly notes, "None of us has ever known enough tenderness."

This lack of tenderness, this not knowing whether we can reveal our deepest selves and still feel safe, takes it toll. For a long time after my ill-fated night with Dana, I experienced extreme mental and physical distress. I became frightfully phobic about encountering her in public. And in what I believe was a psychosomatic response to being symbolically felled by cruel words, I developed a spinal paralysis that made it difficult for me to walk. I tried to conceal these afflictions and, not surprisingly, they did not go away. I began to realize that so much of the misery that exists between Black women ossifies in our bodies and spirits because the experiences never meet air. We depend on "Hush, children," and "Peace, be still," and bear our burdens in silence.

photo © June Jordan

*Evelyn C. White*

I believe that "keeping the madness to ourselves" is one of the primary reasons for the tension, stress, self-loathing, mistrust and lack of authentic intimacy that is so pervasive in the Black lesbian community.

After Dana, I resolved to move beyond the silence, to put down the mask. Since then, sessions with a chiropractor and a psychiatrist who specializes in trauma have helped steady me. I even sent Dana—inscribed with sincere words of thanks for the good parts of the friendship—a copy of *The Color Purple*. But the most important part of my healing has evolved from that peaceful afternoon spent in Pat Parker's study, during which I began to fathom the ways in which we misrepresent our Black lesbian identities. I know that it is only in speaking openly about the masks we wear and the masks that have been thrust upon us that I can truly honor Pat Parker's passionate refrain, "Black folks do not, Black folks do not, Black folks do not commit suicide."

*Evelyn C. White is editor of* The Black Woman's Health Book *(Seal Press). Her official biography of Alice Walker is under contract with W. W. Norton. She lives in Oakland, California.*

## Epilogue

"Mirror Images," first printed in the July 1998 issue of *Essence* magazine, is an adaptation of a piece I wrote for *The Lesbian Health Book* (Seal Press, 1997). Within minutes, or so it seemed to me, of its publication in *Essence*, I began to receive calls and letters from women across the country in which they shared the impact the essay had had on them.

With the exception of a meek and meager "thank you," I was unable to respond in any significant way to the scores of women (most of them self-described Black lesbians or bisexuals) who contacted me. Even now, as I write these words, I'm aware of an unsettling queasiness in my belly. Truth be told, I'm still suffering the psychological effects of the incident (which happened in 1992). On some level, I expect that I always will.

As difficult and draining as it was to write the essay (and deal with its aftermath), I did so because I knew I was not the only Black lesbian to endure such trauma. Indeed, the feedback I've received makes it clear that such incidents are not uncommon. Describing the hellish break-up with her lover, one sister wrote, "I agree that Black lesbians wear so many masks that it is often difficult to find the real person underneath all the facades. I am interested in the healing process from a painful relationship that once so beautiful turned so ugly." Another remarked, "What touches me most is your saying how vulnerable you feel in Black women's intimacy and how much it takes to make yourself open to it. Cause I feel that. And I didn't realize I needed to hear someone else say it."

I was also told that while sympathetic to the issues I raised in the essay, many Black lesbians were angry at me for "airing dirty laundry." "They're upset that you gave a bad impression of Black lesbians to the straight Black women who read *Essence*," a well-connected friend explained. "They think you should have kept that madness to yourself."

On the contrary, as I wrote in the essay, I believe that "keeping the madness to ourselves" is one of the primary reasons for the tension, stress, self-loathing, mistrust and lack of authentic intimacy that is so pervasive in the Black lesbian community. I was not about to augment my considerable despair (and that of my future lovers) by concealing what had happened to me. In fact, as written, the essay only examines a few of the issues that, in my view, contributed to my clash with "Dana." The whole story is a tortuously long and extremely complex Black, female saga that I do not as of yet have the courage, clarity or stamina to write. With that in mind, I'm still pondering the advice of the sister who suggested that Black lesbians develop our inner resources to the point where the devastating humiliation we suffer at the hands of each other is "reduced to minor insult and then nothing at all." "We can learn to respond to each other," she wrote, "as we would to drunkards and small children (as the Sufi teach)." Hmm. . .

In the meantime, I press on. Seven years after the incident, I am grateful for the lessons I've learned and for the response "Mirror Images" has generated, especially with regard to Pat Parker, who would have celebrated her 55th birthday this month. Indeed, I find myself happier, healthier, more wise and better loved than ever.

*Continued from page 9*

giant UNOCAL of California. UNOCAL had planned to construct a pipeline through Afghanistan that would have earned UNOCAL billions and the Taliban about 100 million dollars every year. Smeal says pressure from activists was a key factor in UNOCAL's December 4 decision to abandon the project, but that other factors came into play such as low oil prices and the presence in Afghanistan of Osama bin Laden, accused of masterminding the deadly explosions at the United States embassies in Tanzania and Kenya. In addition, UNOCAL closed three of its four offices in the Caspian region, making it the first oil company to retreat from the area.

Smeal considers the UNOCAL withdrawal from Afghanistan a huge victory. When we started working on this, "people said feminist organizations could not affect this," said Smeal, because billions of dollars were at stake. "The more feminists know of their own power, the more they will use it," commented Smeal.

Smeal finds another reason for optimism in increasing attention to the plight of Afghan women from Hillary Clinton. In her speech at a White House event on December 10 to honor the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Clinton devoted most of her fifteen-minute remarks to denouncing the Taliban's repressive laws.

According to Smeal, women in Afghanistan are hearing about the work of the Feminist Majority Foundation, Physicians for Human Rights, and other groups via the Voice of America. Knowing that there is a growing campaign on their behalf offers some measure of hope. When asked if there is any organized resistance on the part of Afghan woman, Smeal said, "We have heard rumors of a women's armed movement, but we can't confirm them. The biggest form of resistance," she said, "is fleeing the country."

Recently, a 22-year-old Afghan woman living in a Pakistani refugee camp wrote to the Feminist Majority Foundation pleading for assistance. She said she wanted to become a lawyer and that her sister wanted to become a doctor, but that their dreams had been destroyed by the Taliban. Because they belong to one of several ethic groups particularly despised by the Taliban, their family risks being killed if they return to Afghanistan.

The young woman wrote, "I am afraid of what will happen to us. We do not have a future. I know I have very bad destiny. I cannot go to school. I do not have a job. I can not take care of my old mother. I cannot take it any more. Why God made me a woman? Why should I suffer all the time? I feel hopeless and I would like to come out of this country."

### What you can do:

Sign petitions to President Clinton, the Secretary of State, your U.S. Senators, and the United Nations available on the Feminist Majority Foundation's website <www.feminist.org>.

Write to President Clinton to urge him to take steps to end the Taliban's reign of terror: President Clinton, The White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20051-0005.

### For more information, contact:

Feminist Majority Foundation, 1600 Wilson Blvd., Suite 801, Arlington, VA 22209, Tel: 703-522-2214, E-mail: <femmaj@feminist.org>. Website: <www.feminist.org>.

Physicians for Human Rights, 100 Boylston Street, Suite 702, Boston, MA 02116, E-mail: <bayotte@phrusa.org>. Website: <www.phrusa.org>. Zohra Rasekh's report is available from their office.

*Genevieve Howe is a political activist living in Boston.*


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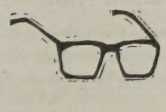
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# Millennium Madness and Movement Improvements

By Surina Khan

For anyone who's been following the Millennium March controversy, the sad state of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (lgbt) movement is pretty apparent. With the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) leading the way, that movement is becoming increasingly corporate, single-issue and conservative. One has only to look at the full page ad—signed by twelve national lgbt organizations and produced by HRC—which appeared in the *New York Times* last summer, a response to the ex-gay ad campaign that preceded it. "Our" ad depicted a white, middle-class, Christian, Republican family from the "heartland of America." Then there's the $100,000 that the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation recently accepted from the Adolph Coors Foundation, a foundation that has helped to build and strengthen several right-wing organizations that specifically attack lgbt people.

But if you thought these events meant there were no surprises left, no new nadir to reach, you didn't attend this past November's "Creating Change" conference, the annual activist event sponsored by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF). There, as thousands of activists debated the crisis of conservatism facing the lgbt movement, we saw a brand-new low, specifically in relation to HRC. If it wasn't clear before, it is absolutely clear now that we must redouble progressive strategizing about the future of lgbt organizing in the United States.

Let me say first that HRC has never met my standards for a movement organization. It has never respected diversity of class, race, ethnicity, and gender, and it is increasingly and explicitly moving ever more to the right. So, there's not much that the HRC does that surprises me. It didn't surprise me when they began organizing a Millennium March for gay rights around a "faith and family" platform, or when they refused to allow community participation in the planning. Why, I wasn't even surprised when I heard that HRC offered people of color "scholarships" to attend a fancy, celebrity-studded dinner and then made them work off their scholarships by serving the dinner. Nor was I shocked when they endorsed Republican Senator Alfonse D'Amato in the recent New York State Senate race.

I *was* a little shocked, however, by HRC executive director Elizabeth Birch's slur against longtime Latina lesbian activist Carmen Vazquez—voiced publicly at "Creating Change."

## A New Low for Elizabeth Birch

Just before the conference, Vazquez wrote an open letter to lgbt activists (circulated widely via the Internet) in which she criticized HRC for endorsing Senator D'Amato. In her letter, Vazquez outlined why HRC's endorsement of D'Amato was a slap in the face to poor people, people of color, women, and all lgbt people. Her analysis and criticisms of HRC were echoed by many other activists before and during the "Creating Change" conference.

Vazquez wrote:

*HRC's endorsement of a prolife candidate who has effectively denied millions of American women the right to choose what to do with their own bodies is not pragmatic. It is wrong. Their endorsement of a man who has repeatedly embarrassed the office of the Senate with his racism and anti-Semitism (mocking Judge Lance Ito's ethnicity, the more recent attempt to use the Holocaust as a campaign smearing device against Chuck Schumer, D'Amato's Jewish opponent in the New York Senate race) is not simple pragmatism. It is complete capitulation to the right wing of this country. It is an outrageous slap at grassroots activists in New York state who have had to endure eighteen years of the Junior Senator's arrogance and contempt as he orchestrated the rise to power of right wing conservatives who despise us and have blocked anti-discrimination and hate crimes legislation in New York state for years.*

On Friday, November 13, while activists at the conference gathered to discuss the Millennium March, the D'Amato endorsement and the direction of the movement, Elizabeth Birch penned and circulated a response. "Carmen Vazquez's recent commentary (distributed on the Internet) is not only destructive, it is irresponsible. It is beneath her. It is beneath all of us," Birch wrote. "Her words and words like them, remind me of what maggots do in a barrel of rice. When they finish consuming the rice, they begin to consume each other."

The maggot comparison is despicable enough, but the racial implications of Birch's letter are really disturbing. Many people have been critical of HRC for their endorsement of D'Amato and many of their other recent decisions. But Birch not only singled out a Latina lesbian for public reprimand, but also used an extraordinarily offensive and arguably racist analogy in her statements.

## A Tale Of Two Movements

The lgbt movement faces a crisis—a pitched, internal struggle over the heart and soul of our fight. The events of the past year have served as a catalyst, sparking much-needed dialogue on the

*Continued on next page*


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*Continued from previous page*

issues confronting our community. When the Ad-Hoc Committee for an Open Process came together to call for democracy in organizing the Millennium March, they were not just protesting the march, but questioning the state of the movement. As the committee noted in an advertisement placed in the Washington Blade, "This is about power and how it is wielded, manipulated and abused. Who sits at the table and who decides how the table is set. This is about the direction of our grassroots movement and what we are fighting for."

My feeling is that it's time for us to accept the fact that the lgbt movement is no longer, if it ever really was, one movement. We are at least two movements—an lgbt progressive movement with a multi-issue agenda committed to fairness, equality, and class, race, and gender justice—and a gay and lesbian conservative movement committed to a single-issue agenda of gay rights and the "normalization" of lesbians and gay men. There have always been conservative lesbians and gay men. But now, conservatives have come to the forefront and are instituting a top-down model—much like that used by the right—in which executive directors set the agenda for the masses. The time has come for us progressives to move forward with our own vision and not assume that we have anything in common with the gay conservatives.

HRC's decision to endorse D'Amato may, in fact, have been a strategic way of cleaning their own house, ridding themselves of any lingering progressives within the organization. They received a great deal of criticism for this decision, but the end result may be that they emerge as a stronger organization—more united than ever behind a conservative, single-issue agenda. They've also opened the door for lots of wealthy gay conservatives who may have thought HRC was too far left before their endorsement of a right-wing candidate.

### Creating a Progressive, Accessible Vision

On the other side of the political spectrum, I believe progressive lgbt people need to continue opening up spaces for dialogue so that we can involve as many people as possible in our movement-building. While I am not interested in struggling to educate the *leaders* of conservative gay groups, I don't think we can afford to dismiss the people who may be members of such organizations. Whether we like it or not, some of these organizations have large constituencies, and I'm interested in reaching these people. When the membership of HRC turns out for the Millennium March, I want the progressive lgbt movement to be prepared to do some massive public education so that we can turn the conservative tide.

> HRC's decision to endorse D'Amato may have been a strategic way of cleaning their own house, ridding themselves of any lingering progressives within the organization.

This means, in part, that we must begin thinking about ways to articulate beliefs, values, and commitment in language that is accessible. How can we reach people who may not necessarily think of themselves as "political"? How can we discuss issues in a way that conveys the importance of multi-issue work and appeals to a sense of fairness for *all people*? For me, one helpful strategy is to talk about how I personally became involved in political activism. When I came out almost ten years ago, I was a very different person than I am today. I didn't see myself as political and being out was all I was willing to do. That was okay. I knew in the back of my mind that being an out lesbian meant something huge—but I wasn't willing to look at the larger picture. Over time I began to understand the connections between my sexual identity, my ethnic identity, and my class privilege.

Before I made that leap, however, I found the conservative forces around me very appealing. They spoke to my desperate desire to fit into the dominant white, straight culture. In fact, when I turned 18, I registered to vote as a Republican. And then I voted for George Bush. I was a conservative person of color. So, when I see how the right—including the gay right—has made inroads into communities of color, I understand why. When I see HRC's cynical elevation of people of color to the Board of Directors of the Millennium March, I understand how that can happen.

In my own life, I ended up taking a different path. Through my lesbian identity I found a progressive movement that was nurturing, stimulating, and filled with an integrity and sense of purpose that I had not known in the conservative world of my youth. My process of change gives me hope that others, too, can change. I am hopeful that we can continue to build relationships, not only with other progressives, but with people who, like me, may temporarily buy in to the dominant rhetoric. By reaching out to people in a respectful way, perhaps we can appeal to the dignity inherent in all of us and work together for a world in which justice and democracy prevail.

*Surina Khan is Associate Analyst at Political Research Associates, a Massachusetts-based think tank and research center that monitors the U.S. political right.*


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WELFAREBEAT

# This Is An Emergency:

## Welfare Reform, the "Shame on Cellucci Eight," and What I Learned in Prison

photo © Marilyn Humphries

*Occupying the Massachusetts Governor's office, November 30. L-R: Marie Kennedy, professor and former recipient; Diane Dujon, former recipient, welfare & labor activist; welfare recipient and activist Debbie Hoyt Frazier, and labor activist Susan Moir.*

***"If there's one thing we did right, it was the day we started to fight."***

By Ann Withorn

My God, what are you old white ladies doing in here? . . . No offense." With these words one of our fellow residents in the Nashua Street Jail greeted the eight of us who had chosen to forego bail after our arrest at a demonstration in the Massachusetts Governor's office. When we answered that we were in jail to protest the imposition of Massachusetts's two-year welfare time limit that was starting that night, November 30, our questioner, Nicky, gave a big grin. "Hey, you're cool. It's wrong."

Lots of words have been written about welfare reform, and welfare time limits. But none are more basic and true than the simple words of confirmation which made our hearts sing that night: "it's wrong." And no question is more important to answer than why a bunch of old white ladies—as well as students, male and female labor leaders, former welfare recipients, activists of all sorts, along with folks from faith-based and other communities, from universities and grass-roots organizations—were all willing to get arrested in a last ditch effort to stop welfare time limits.

So what was the big deal?

As others have written in *Sojourner*, Massachusetts has one of the toughest time-limit rules in the nation—"non-exempt" families can receive welfare benefits for only 24 months out of every 60 months. On December 1, 1996, the clock started ticking for 40,000 Massachusetts families, and recipients and advocates began the long march to push back the time limits and broaden the possibilities for waivers which we hoped would protect people in the short run.

We knew that even under normal circumstances most women were usually off welfare (the first time) in about two years. So we figured that there would be fewer than 20,000 families, or approximately 60,000 people, actually cut off in two years. At the same time, we knew that people who lost jobs, or whose men left again, would be entitled to little and would be even more invisible. But then the rolls started dropping at an incredible clip: it turned out that Massachusetts had one of the highest rates of kicking people off the rolls for procedural violations (like missing paperwork or not attending a meeting). Many immigrants also dropped off out of fear of how the new rules might affect their status in the United States or that of their families.

Administration officials crowed at the drop in the rolls. But the numbers only confirmed what many of us have known since the sixties—that the worse the welfare system treats people the less they use it: women return to batterers, take jobs with hours that put kids at risk, move back to families whose earlier dysfunction had already made them vulnerable.

Meanwhile, Massachusetts recipients and welfare advocates were trying every trick in the book to turn the situation around. Lobbyists formulated legislation to protect more people; we developed information campaigns aimed at recipients—"Do Not Panic" was the title of one flyer attempting to support recipients in thinking strategically. There were efforts at public education and meetings with friendly legislative leaders. A statewide coalition of recipient-based groups was created (the Economic Survival Coalition), and recipient groups joined with other coalitions of service providers and advocates organizing statewide and locally. Just recently in the Boston area, money from the United Way and the city has helped to support the organizing of low income women around these issues (Low Income Women's Organizing Committee—LIWOC).

> **Because the right is always making connections between crime and "long term welfare dependency," we haven't found it very possible to argue that even when a mother is in legal trouble, she still needs money for her kids. She needs more help, not more punishment.**

One of the most successful of the new coalitions has been Working Massachusetts, a group of labor activists, welfare activists and faith-based groups aimed at "standing up for the welfare of all workers." Under the auspices of Working Massachusetts, legislation was filed, a presence was created on some of the state's official "welfare-to-work" committees, and education about welfare was conducted in regional labor councils and other labor venues—with the explicit support of the new head of the AFL-CIO, Bobby Haynes. In short, by this year, welfare rights folks had found powerful new allies in the many long time labor activists who joined the struggle—people from Jobs with Justice and the Contingent Work Campaign, from the Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice, and from some of the more progressive unions, including the state Social Workers Union, SEIU Local 509.

Last spring, with strong leadership from Susan Moir (a former welfare recipient and now a labor leader and labor educator), and Elly Leary (a secretary, local union president and women's labor activist) Working Massachusetts decided that all the lobbying and education was not enough. Over the summer a plan of action emerged in which Working Mass., in conjunction with other groups like Survivors, Inc. and The Women's Alliance, would host a series of actions aimed at building a broader base and getting media attention. Throughout the fall momentum-building actions took place: speakouts, demonstrations and marches, conferences, faith-group meetings with the Governor's aides and a big rally on November 21. The first events were lively and powerful but drew little press. Gradually, though, the series of increasingly well-attended activities started to gain some local and even some statewide press.

In the meantime, the clock was still ticking. After Republican Governor Paul Cellucci's narrow victory in November, little hope remained for immediate change via state policy. Finally, it seemed crystal clear to almost all the activists who had been working on the issue that the only tactic left was the extraordinary—to declare an emergency on the night time limits were to go into effect and sit-in at the Governor's office until he agreed to issue a blanket extension of welfare benefits.

### The Only Place to Be on This Shameful Night

On November 30, as planned, over 30 of us gathered in the Governor's office. The spirit in the room was somber and serious. The state troopers, the Governor's community relations staff, the head of his Human Services Executive office and the usual Department of Transitional Assistance spokesperson all tried to talk us into leaving: "Go to the Secretary of State's office, you can talk with him there;" "If you will just come down to Gardner Hall we can listen to your concerns." The State Police Lieutenant even tried to tell us that the Governor's waiting room was "private property." We calmly answered that this was the Governor's office; this was the place from which action had to be taken now and that we liked the plush carpet and soft chairs as a waiting place. We answered, too, that we were not there to be "listened to"; we were there until the Governor's office responded to the emergency that had been created by the Legislature and by state officials.

As the press gathered we decided to talk among ourselves, not just to them, about why we were there. Many of us didn't even know each other, and the stories were powerful and energizing. Debbie Hoyt Fraser, a current recipient hitting the time limits, talked about how she was boxed into a corner, and how caring for her children's needs did not allow her to take available jobs. Former recipients talked about why they had needed welfare, and how little sense the new rules make for women who need education and time. We were visited by some of the few friends we have in the Legislature—Warren Tolman, Alice Wolf and Byron Rushing—and we knew others were with us in spirit—Diane Wilkerson,

*Continued on next page*

*Continued from previous page*

Charlotte Ritchie, Gloria Fox, to name just a few. We sang, "If there's one thing we do know, it's that time limits have got to go. Keep your eyes on the Prize, Hold On." To most of us in the room this was the only place to be on this night, the shameful night on which Massachusetts willfully created more poverty for so many children and their mothers.

Until the night before the sit-in, I had planned to get arrested, post bail and get back to the phones to keep building the momentum for future actions. I have two daughters at home—twelve and fifteen years old—and have been in the struggle long enough to feel perfectly clear that sitting in and getting arrested make enough of a statement. My plans changed on the day before the sit-in when I talked to Kip Tiernan, the founder of the homeless women's shelter Rosie's Place, on the way to our civil disobedience training session. She told me she planned not to post bail, that she would go to jail because it seemed like a natural part of the process, the way to more fully understand why we were doing this.

Kip is a friend and hero of mine, and somehow I could not imagine her going to jail without me, so I decided to do it, too. I had been saying all year that the time limits were so wrong I couldn't imagine letting it happen without drama. I had half-joked about how it was good that I had kids because otherwise I would have had to set myself on fire. So how could I not spend one night wrapped in the protection of what I knew would be the white privilege of a well-publicized protest? I came to the State House, then, ready to be arrested and sent to jail—I had my shoes without laces and little of value on my person. It would, I assumed, at least be a learning experience and an outlet for my fury that Massachusetts was doing this cruel deed.

When they officially closed the State House and ordered us under arrest, we went peacefully, with only a few folks insisting on being dragged out. As we were taken outside there was a large crowd of chanting protesters who had shed their candles from the vigil and found a rousing voice which echoed in the covered driveway. "Hey, hey, ho, ho, welfare cuts have got to go." When we drove away in a motorcade of sirens, blue lights and cleared roadways, it felt like we were visiting dignitaries. The 31 of us who had decided to get arrested, including the eight who planned to stay in jail, were filled with energy and a sense of pride that we had broken the media blockade, brought new blood to the struggle and begun, truly, to build a movement for economic justice.

photo © Marilyn Humphries

*Protesters rally on the Boston Common, November 28, to stop welfare time limits.*

### The Women We Met in Jail

A speeding prison van took us to the Nashua Street Jail in handcuffs, and as we slipped and slid around for a few miles a tighter bond began to form among the "Shame on Cellucci Eight," as we called ourselves. All of us had been activists for a long time, and we all were clear about why we were there—we thought. Like me, most of us seemed to be thinking of bearing witness to the crime of welfare reform; and we were following the logic of our convictions and expressing the depth of our concern by not paying bail to an unjust system. We weren't thinking very much—except for Kip who is always two steps ahead of everyone else—about how much we would come to see the connections between the issue of the time limits and the women we would meet in jail during those twelve hours and in the court holding area the next morning.

By six o'clock the next morning we joined the other inmates in a small room where we were given breakfasts of milk, a soft yellow apple and some excruciatingly sweet multi-colored boxed cereal. Many of the women knew Kip and we began talking in small groups about why we all were there. Some women were clearly in trouble with the after-effects of some substance; many seemed to be in for current or past drug or solicitation charges; and most were well aware of the welfare cutoff. One woman said she was hitting the welfare time limit that day. She said that her worker had canceled her exit appointment and that she hadn't filed for an appeal—she didn't know anything about being able to do that.

Nicky, our young greeter from the night before, was full of animated stories about injustice from men, but her bravado would lapse for a minute every time she mentioned her two kids in the custody of her mother, a secretary. Then a bleak look of pain would pass over her face, and she would quickly change the subject back to yet another bawdy, angry tale. We met a woman who had kicked her drug habit, was doing well at a community college, but had been caught up now on an old charge and feared losing everything she had again. Every woman I spoke with said that the welfare cuts would hurt people. One woman told me, "There will be more women in here after this. Or more women's kids will be in jail. There is no way out."

*Continued on next page*

# Sitting Down for Welfare Rights

## By Patricia Maher

Thirty-one Massachusetts residents participated in the sit-in at the Governor's office on November 30 to protest the imposition of the two-year time limit on welfare benefits for women and children. I was honored to be among them.

As we sat in the Governor's office—in the plush furniture and on the thick carpet, surrounded by a Christmas tree and wrapped packages—we spontaneously held a speakout about why we were there. Many of us shared similar anger and outrage; one woman spoke of not having "been this angry since the Vietnam War"; another spoke tearfully of how her mother had relied on welfare to be able to make a break from her battering father. We all spoke of the situation as a dire emergency, and we agreed that the so-called great economy is great for the top five percent of the population and not for anyone else.

Sitting there on the Governor's rug, among old colleagues and new friends, I thought about the personal convictions that had led me there. I decided to do civil disobedience for welfare rights because I feel that I must do everything in my power to prevent these time limits from being imposed. I did it because I just can't let the Commonwealth of Massachusetts abuse poor women and children in my name.

> I decided it was time to go the distance for poor women and children in my own town.

I did it because I am outraged. I, too, have been walking around saying, "I haven't been this mad since . . . ." In my case, the reference points are the beginning of the AIDS/HIV epidemic, when I knew that federal and state governments had nothing good in store for queers or people of color, and during the Persian Gulf war, when a bombing campaign, xenophobia, and patriotism were manufactured seemingly overnight.

My work at Haymarket People's Fund, a progressive foundation in Boston where contradictions about class abound, also affected my decision to sit down for welfare rights. Through my work I am acutely aware of exactly how much some people are benefiting from the bloated stock marked right now, and of how tenuous the economic security net is. I was proud to be demonstrating with one of our longtime Haymarket donors, Sally Levering, who sat in the Governor's office and stated publicly that she had benefited inappropriately from a system that denies so many people basic support.

Another reason I participated in the sit-in was that I have spent a great deal of spare time in the last few years witnessing human rights abuses in Northern Ireland during the famous Protestant "Orange marches." I have placed myself in a fair amount of personal risk to stand with the Irish in their attempts to create peace with justice, and to stand down the Irish version of the Klan, with concomitant military power provided by the British Government.

I decided it was time to go the distance for poor women and children in my own town.

*Particia Maher is the executive director of Haymarket and a founding member of PeaceWatch Ireland.*

*Continued from previous page*

### Stereotypes and the Stories We Don't Tell

By the time we were taken to court, I realized that my stay in jail had a whole other meaning than what I had anticipated. Even though I have been doing welfare rights work for almost 30 years—even though I have worked with hundreds of women on welfare, and with women who were students and who were in prison—I hadn't felt the connection between welfare reform and the criminal justice system in the way I was suddenly beginning to feel it. In doing welfare education we are always trying to help the general public identify with recipients as mothers, as battered women, as women alone whose children are too chronically sick to allow them time to work, as women trying to go to school to get the training for a good job.

Very often, however, we don't—we feel like we can't—talk about whether women will choose prostitution as their most viable alternative to welfare. Women on welfare don't want to play into stereotypes: they don't want to talk about all the reasons why drugs and drink can feel like the only escape from the poverty and pain that is connected to using welfare to live. Because the right is always making connections between crime and "long term welfare dependency," we haven't found it very possible to argue that even when a mother is in legal trouble, she still needs money for her kids. She needs more help, not more punishment. It's tricky because kids can't survive all their mothers' pain, but it is also true that mothers who show that same crack in their bravado that we saw in Nicky need the hope of getting their kids back—yes, with welfare as one of the things to help them, finally, break the grip of addictions. As society takes away the tattered and torn security blanket of welfare, we leave too many women with nothing but despair.

As we filed into the courtroom to be charged (and unshackled), I knew that I couldn't only be elated because our fine action succeeded far beyond our jaded expectations and because it finally feels like people may begin to remember the power that comes from building a movement, and not an organization, or an agenda, or a "new initiative." Because of my night in jail I will remember how deep the meaning of all this goes, how close to the social bone welfare reform cuts, and how important it is that we never fight just for those recipients who are most understandable to those among us who "play by the rules."

Thank you, Kip.

*Ann Withorn teaches social policy at University of Massachusetts in Boston and is a longtime welfare rights activist.*


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WELFAREBEAT

# In Our Own Words–

## Women on Welfare Talk Back

photo © Marilyn Humphries

*Lea Luz Rios*

***"We're survivors. We do what we have to do to survive. Sometimes, we even smile, so no one will see how we feel."***

*Over the past several months,* Sojourner's *"WelfareBeat" committee has sponsored a series of roundtable discussions with current—and now, because of state time limits,* former*—welfare recipients. Working with Survivors, Inc., a group that has been organizing for economic justice for many years, we brought together women who wanted to tell their stories in their own words. How did they make the decision to turn to welfare? What obstacles blocked other choices? What's happening now, as the time limits in Massachusetts push most of them off the rolls? And what do they want to say about the stigma of welfare? About economic justice? Racism and sexism? About their dreams for the future?*

*All of the women who joined the discussions are students struggling to finish their undergraduate degrees, and all have been active in the fight to preserve a social safety net. Lea Luz Rios is on the board of Survivors, Inc. and was one of the lead organizers of a recent speakout against welfare reform cosponsored by* Sojourner *and dozens of other statewide groups. Lynette Anderson is a member of the Massachusetts Welfare Rights Union and has been working on issues affecting low income women for many years. Lina Ramirez and Nancy Kane are students at the University of Massachusetts in Human Services Advocacy. Linda Carney is a member of the "WelfareBeat" committee, on the board of Survivors, Inc., and is the coordinator of the group's newspaper,* Survival News. *She is also a student at Springfield College of Human Services and is a performance artist.*

*Betty Reid Mandell, who was a primary coordinator of the roundtables, joined the discussion. She has been a welfare rights activist since 1964, and is the founder of Survivors, Inc. She is also a member of the "WelfareBeat" committee. She is proud and excited to help make more space for the voices of low income and poor women.*

—Stephanie Poggi, *Sojourner* editor

**Stephanie: Lea, can we start with your story? When did you come to the United States?**

Lea: I came to this country in 1981 because of the war in Nicaragua. At first, I was living in Miami. Like many other people who come here, I didn't get any help from the government. No shelter, nothing like that. But immigration gave me permission to work, so I started working in a restaurant a month after I came. My income was $100 for a week, working more than 40 hours. I didn't speak English and I didn't know the system at all, and my boss was making a lot of money off of my work. On that $100 a week, I was paying income tax.

After a few years, I moved to Boston and started working in a coffee shop. They paid me $150 for 72 hours a week. I was alone, renting a room for $50 a week, and I had to spend the other $100 for food and transportation. It wasn't enough. I wanted to enjoy things, and I couldn't.

**Stephanie:** Did you have any other support from anyone?

Lea: No, I was so far away from my family. I had nobody here, no support at all. When I look back on it, I don't know how I'm still alive, how I survived in this country by myself with so little. For over seven years, my life was home, work, home, church, work, home, church, work. That was my schedule. It was a time in my life when I had no entertainment, no theater, no other places. I was very depressed, not a little, *very* depressed. I wanted to kill myself, and I tried to do it. For six months after that I went to Boston City Hospital every day, visiting the psychiatrist in therapy . . . every single day.

At that time, I was still working at the coffee shop and I was also cleaning the rooming house that I lived in. Even though I paid for my room, the owner said that I had to clean all the rooms. It was abusive, but I didn't know what to do about it. I felt intimidated—even though I knew that I was here legally under the asylum program.

I was trying hard to learn English. Every day I prayed to God to give me two hours to study and I tried to learn new words. I watched TV in English and tried to read the newspaper.

Finally, in 1987, I got my permanent residency because people without green cards got amnesty that year. I got a job as a driver for The Ride, which is a Massachusetts transportation program for people with disabilities. I was very happy working for $8 an hour.

I was at The Ride for just one year because I decided to go to Nicaragua to visit my parents. It turned out that I went just to see them die. My father died 20 days after I got there, and my mother died four months after my father. It was very hard for me.

When I returned to the United States, I met my son's father in Miami. I thought he was my happiness—I thought that finally I had found my life. But he was a very macho man. A man who thinks he can have as many women as he wants. He can work if he wants to—things like that. I saw that he was living off my wages. So, I left him and came back to Boston. He didn't know that I was living in Boston, and that was a good thing because I was afraid of him. He thought I had returned to Nicaragua, and he went back there to look for me. Then he couldn't return to the United States because it had become too expensive and crossing the border had become a lot harder.

**Stephanie:** Is this when you decided to apply for welfare?

Lea: Yes, I was four months pregnant and I was working cleaning houses, but I could only get about 20 hours of work a week. So, I was making about $100 and it wasn't enough for rent and food and transportation. Then a friend of mine told me about welfare. I didn't know what it was. A case worker interviewed me and tried to send me back to Miami. She said, "We can give you money to return to Miami, but not to stay here in Boston." I said, "No, thank you." I didn't know what my rights were, but I knew that I had been paying my taxes in Massachusetts for twelve years. I knew it wasn't right to try to send me to Miami where I had lived for just a short time. When she saw that I was a little mad, she said, "Okay, we're going to help you."

I didn't receive the benefits for very long because I got more hours as a house cleaner, so they cut me off. But I did get health care out of it—I went to the hospital for a check-up.

A month after my son was born, I went back to welfare because I needed to take care of him and couldn't work enough hours to support us at the same time. Since then I've been on it, about four and a half years now.

Then, about six months after my son was born, my social worker told me that I could go to college. I got admitted to the University of Massachusetts. She also told me that I could apply for financial aid. All those years I had been in this country—since 1981—I didn't know about all that opportunity.

And then, I finally found Miss Betty Reid Mandell. [laughing] God put her in my path. My first semester of school, she wasn't just teaching there, she was *really* there. Just when I

*Continued on next page*

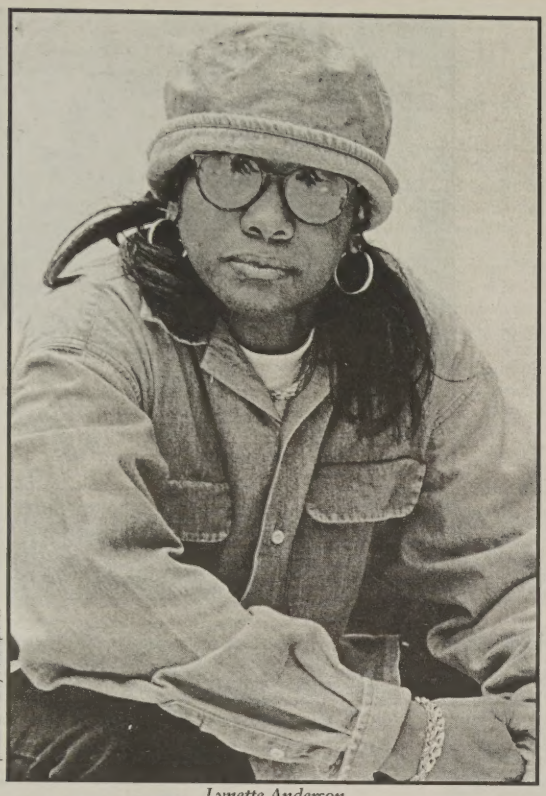

photo © Marilyn Humphries

*Lynette Anderson*

*Continued from previous page*

needed her. Little by little she opened my mind, my feeling, my everything.

**Betty:** [laughing] And then God put you to work at Survivors, Inc., to organize for welfare rights?

**Lea:** Exactly! But I have to tell you all that I am very disappointed in the church. I only go because I am grateful to God and I want to pray. But I don't trust the church people anymore. A while ago, I was talking on the phone to one of the ministers at the church where I was a member. He told me that he wanted to see me get off welfare so much, and he couldn't wait to see me get a job. I was so mad that I hung up the phone. He owns a house with a lot of room, but when he saw me in a shelter he never told me, "Lea, come to my home." I was pregnant and he never told me that. Also, when I went to his house, he never told me, "Lea, here are ten bucks for you." Never. Since that time, I don't go to his church, and I don't believe in church anymore. The people who have really helped me have nothing to do with the church.

**Stephanie:** Lea, what's happening with you and the time limits?

**Lea:** On December 18, I'm going to graduate from school at U/Mass, with my degree in Human Services Advocacy. I applied for an extension in my benefits, just for a few months, so that I can find a job. But they haven't responded to me. So I think that my son, Carlos, and I have been cut off. I'm not sure what we're going to do now.

## My Case Worker Said I'd Never Get a Waiver

**Linda:** Lynette, can you tell us your story? I know you've been fighting to get exempted from the time limits so you can finish school.

**Lynette:** I'm a student in the College of Public and Community Service at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, majoring in Human Services like Lea. I've been a recipient for eleven years. My daughter just turned twelve. My issue is time limits, which as you know, in Massachusetts started to go into effect as of December 1, 1998. My case worker told me that my benefits were going to be exhausted and I was going to be off the rolls. This would mean that I wouldn't be able to finish school even though I would graduate next year with my degree if I was allowed to continue.

I've been really upset about this and didn't know what to do. Should I find full-time work and part-time school or not finish at all? I knew there was no way I could finish all my requirements by December 1.

I told myself that the one thing I know is that I'll survive. I have to take care of my daughter and myself. I know so many other single mothers in this situation. Every month we all get a letter and every month you have to go in and talk about how much time you have left and what you're going to do. They keep asking you how you are going to support yourself after your benefits are cut off. I told them I'm going to finish school! Finish school! Finish school! That's how I'm going to support myself. Get my degree. [everyone laughing] Get my degree. Get my degree! How can I make this any clearer for you? I want to finish school!

**What is wrong with this picture? You want me to go to work, but you won't let me get the education to do it.**

I don't want to make $5 an hour. I want a decent job after I get my degree. My worker says, "Fine. Stay in school. We don't have a problem with that, you just won't get any money." What is wrong with this picture? You want me to go to work, but you won't let me get the education to do it. I'm not staying home and just waiting for my cash to kick in to my EBT [food stamps] card. I'm a productive person.

**Nancy:** You hear that the solution is that you can get a job and go to school at night. Who's going to take care of the kids? It's a middle class ideal of what *should* be going on: why don't *they* just do *this*? If we had hubbies at home to take care of the kids, maybe we would.

**Lynette:** Yes, and if the husband isn't there, women with more money can pay someone to be there. Unfortunately, we don't have that. Anyway, I decided a long time ago that I would keep appealing and appealing to be allowed to finish school. They aren't going to kick me off!

I talked to my case worker, who said that it was hopeless to apply for a waiver. But I managed to get help from Greater Boston Legal Services. I got a legal advocate and they helped me in the battle to extend my benefits. So, I'm happy to say that I just found out that I can now finish school—I have been found to be exempt from the time limit and work requirements because I started my educational program before January 1, 1995. I know that many other single mothers don't have a legal advocate to help them or they may have started their education after that date. They need more time.

I also feel bad for a lot of other women who have three, four, five kids. I only have one. They haven't had the opportunity to better their education. When they get kicked off, what are they going to do? Shelters are full already.

## Men Can Hit You . . .

**Betty:** Lina, can you tell us about your situation?

**Lina:** Well, I came from the Dominican Republic in 1982, and now I'm 24 years old and have a three-year-old child. I started my education in Massachusetts at a two-year college. When I entered, they weren't talking about time limits. I just found out about it very recently. I didn't know that if I had gone to a four-year college, I might have been exempted from workfare. They never told me that. So, I went to a two-year college and at least I was getting childcare.

When I decided to transfer my credits to the University of Massachusetts, I was told that the state would no longer help me with childcare. I was, as it turns out, exempt from workfare because my child is under six years old—but I was no longer eligible for childcare. My worker told me that I needed to find childcare on my own. She asked me if I wanted to work or keep going to school. I told her I wanted to continue my education.

I was lucky. I found childcare through a local anti-poverty group. I saw the flyer and signed up my child.

Last May, my social worker asked me if I wanted to cancel my benefits. She said that if I closed my case, they would give me that amount of time if I ever need to go back—because after the time limit you have to wait five years. I told her no, I want to continue.

**Betty:** What's happening with you and the time limits now?

**Lina:** I was just cut off. But I'm still studying. It's going to take me two more years to finish. At least I'm getting work study now. I'm going to try to find a part-time job.

**Stephanie:** What are you studying in school?

**Lina:** Human Services, too. I want to work with domestic violence. I especially want to work with the Hispanic community. Most Dominican women grow up with the culture that men can hit you and you have to stay there, and there's no future for you. They come here with that view, and get in a relationship and don't know what to do. Then there is the language barrier, too. Once I finish my education I hope I can get a job in a shelter or program for abused women and try to help.

**Betty:** The state is really not supporting education at all. For future cases, they only plan to approve two years of higher education. That's all. Claire McIntire, head of the Department of Transitional Assistance, says they prefer short training programs—four to six weeks is their favorite. They call it "job readiness programs" where they tell you how to talk in an interview, how to dress.

**Lynette:** It's so degrading. They feel that a lot of mothers on welfare don't know these things! How to get there on time!

## Taking Care of Children by Ourselves

**Linda:** The real issue is that mothers on welfare are taking care of children by themselves and don't have adequate child care. If their child is sick in the morning, they're going to be late for work because they have to find other day care or other people to take care of their children. During school vacations, if you don't have a partner, what do you do? If you do have a partner, one of you would have to take work off. If you're a single mother, are you going to find a job that's going to let you take February vacation off, April vacation, summer vacation? That's ridiculous. Summer camp costs a lot of

*Linda Carney and her son Philip.*

money. If you're making the minimum wage, of say $5.25 hour—how are you supposed to get by?

**Nancy:** Even on $8 or $10 an hour, it's hard to support yourself. You need an apartment, electricity, a telephone, medical expenses, everything that goes into sustaining life for you and your kid or kids. I had to move in with a couple. I'm living in a room that is about a quarter of the size of this room with my daughter, Amanda. That's where I'm living. It's a sacrifice I'm making to get ahead.

When I was born, my family was on welfare. My mother had my brother and me. Growing up in Dorchester, Massachusetts, I was determined that I would never be on it as an adult. It was such a degrading thing, and as a kid I always felt so inferior. Then I got involved with my daughter's father—he's an alcoholic, a drug user, he took money from me. The sad thing is that I had been working my way up until then.

Like Lea, I ended up supporting him, and he was taking money from me to do drugs so I left him and had to move in with my parents for a couple of years. That felt so bad—I was 22 and had a child who was a year old and here I was, living with my parents.

Then I lived at a HUD-subsidized place for a while and after that, moved in with another single mom. I never really had the dignity of having my own place, really having my own place. Then I got laid off three times in two years. I thought, "God's obviously telling you something." I realized I was never going to be able to afford to be on my own with Amanda if I didn't do something and do it right away.

That's when I decided to jump back into school. My friends kept saying, "You should really try to see if you can get assistance." My pride was just choking me. I said, "No, I'll do it, I'll do it, I'll do it." I thought it was okay for my friends to get help, but I didn't want to go for help for myself because it was something that was ingrained in me when I was young.

It was funny because the day that I applied for assistance was the same day that I renewed my driver's license. In two state-run offices, I was treated so dramatically differently. I had heard the stories before, but when I actually went in, I was so appalled. And honestly, I know that because I'm white, I got the better treatment. I know that.

**Linda:** I think I was treated worse at some welfare offices because I was white.

**Nancy:** Kind of like, "you should know better."

**Lynette:** Thank you. [Mimicking case workers]: What are *you* doing up here? Look at you.

**Linda:** You're wearing *lipstick*?

**Lynette:** *You're* on welfare?! . . . .

**Betty:** Where did you get those nice clothes?

**Linda:** And I have to tell them about the Harvest Coop Free Store.

**Lea:** That is true. They are always checking you to see if you are wearing good earrings, if you have a leather coat. They speculate. They want to know how you got that.

**Lynette:** I used to feel when I would go into the office that I had to dress the part. Don't wear gold earrings. You're not allowed to have a boyfriend who might buy you something.

**Betty:** [Mimicking welfare case workers]: You have a boyfriend?!

## We're Supposed to Get Married

**Linda:** The big question they have is, "Why aren't you married?" Because that's what we're supposed to do—get married. They think that if we were married, we wouldn't have these problems.

**Stephanie:** What do you feel about the pressure to marry? You know how the preamble to the welfare bill talks about marriage and illegitimacy, etc.? It reminds me of when Dan Quayle said that welfare recipients really have "moral poverty" more than anything?—because of not being married. *That* was supposed to be the big crime.

**Lynette:** Oh yeah, marry an abusive boyfriend?! That's the solution? A lot of the women who are on welfare came from an abusive marriage. The husband beat her ass and

The big question they have is, "Why aren't you married?" Because that's what we're supposed to do—get married. They think that if we were married, we wouldn't have these problems.

was terrible to their kids. She has to get out of it! So what does she do? She has to get out. She has to get help from somewhere. She has to turn to welfare. And you have a lot of women that come out of abusive situations *being married.* And they stayed married and just can't take it anymore. They're tired of getting beaten. They're tired of their kids being treated badly and that's why they need help. That's why they need welfare. And then not having any skills, no experience.

**Lea:** I went to hand out petitions against the time limits, and one man came by and said, "You women need to stay away from men!" And I said, "Oh no, you are the ones who better stay away from women!"

**Everyone:** Right! Exactly!

**Linda:** All that excess sperm run amok. [laughing] Think about it, we can only make one baby every nine months, most of the time. They can make billions and billions of them. The government needs to control their sperm.

## Why Don't We Just Give Our Children to the State?

**Lynette:** Another big problem is the family cap—the state won't support additional children. What are the exceptions? If you have a child because of rape or incest, and you can prove it—you've got to *prove* it—then maybe you can get an exemption and get money for that child. [reading from Massachusetts policy]: It says right here, "There are no exemptions if you get pregnant due to birth control failure, if the man lies about his using birth control, if you are pressured into sex—but it is not rape or incest. The only other way that an excluded child can get cash benefits is if something happens to you so you cannot care for that child: disability, you go to prison, you get killed . . ."

**Linda:** Why don't we just give our children to the Department of Social Services? Why don't we just all give our children to them? Just give up legal custody.

**Betty:** No joke. Connecticut, which has already hit its time limits, says part of their official state plan to deal with the outcome is to put children of poor women into foster care. I heard this from a woman with the Department of Health and Human Services. This is the new official safety net—to take children away and give them to foster families. I mean, we all knew this—that a lot of kids were going into foster care, but for a state to sit down and actually say that this is the plan?

**Lynette:** It's hard to believe. But that's how things are going. What are women supposed to do with their kids when the state is not providing the money for childcare? How are women supposed to go to work?

**Linda:** When I had childcare from AFDC, they would only pay $2.50 an hour. I needed to find somebody who would watch my son Philip for $2.50! That's what they're calling child care! It was $2.50.

**Betty:** I think now it's $2 per hour that the state will pay.

**Lea:** And a lot of people don't know what it's like to get your child to the daycare if you don't have money for a car. For two years when I first started school, my son's daycare was in Roxbury, near Tremont Street. I lived in South Boston. So, I took two buses to get there, and two buses to get back to school. And then two buses again to pick up my son and then two buses to go home.

Eight buses a day, every day for two years. In rain, in bad weather. I put my shopping and my son in the stroller. My little boy cried sometimes because of the cold. And believe me, one day I cried with him because, you know, I was cold, too.

**Betty:** Oh, my god. It's amazing you didn't have a breakdown at that point. I don't understand how people keep their mental health.

## Stigma and Scapegoating

**Linda:** It's always women and children that this is happening to. Always.

**Lynette:** What about the men? What do we have to say about them?

**Linda:** There's no law saying that if the mother of your child is on welfare for two years, *you* have to go out and get a job. You know? Why does it fall solely on the mother?

**Lynette:** Child support is a joke as far as I'm concerned. You have to fill out those forms that

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ask about the father's whereabouts—but it doesn't seem like they're doing anything with that information. So many fathers have just disappeared and are not paying any kind of support, nothing. You tell the caseworker, "Okay, he's in this state, this is his social security number." You give them everything down to the color shoes that he wore, but they can't find him. So that system is not good because they're not finding the fathers.

**Linda:** But women who leave men who abuse them, they can't afford to give that information. And those women should actually be heroes, instead of blamed for not giving the information. A lot of us have left men who are going to kill us or our children. We left to take care of our children.

**Nancy:** That's why I left. Because he hit me, you know. If I chose to be there, then it's on me. But my daughter, Amanda—she didn't choose to be there, so why should I put her at risk to get what I've been getting?

**Stephanie:** You were so brave, Nancy. Because it's so hard to leave for so many reasons. Even before the end of welfare, it was so hard to find affordable housing and decent employment that a lot of abused women had to think—"Well, do I want to go to a shelter and probably stay there for a really long time, or do I want to live here with my boyfriend or husband and get beaten up?" What kind of choice is that? A few years ago in Boston, women moved from shelter to shelter sometimes for over two years with no possibility of ever finding a place to live permanently. And that was before the time limits and welfare reform. Today it's ten times worse.

Can we also talk a little bit about the stigma of being on welfare? Everybody has heard about how AFDC was one percent of the whole budget—that's such a tiny amount. So how do we explain the fact that society has been able to focus so much bad feeling toward women on welfare? We know a lot of it is racism. A lot is scapegoating to take attention away from other social problems. It's backlash against women demanding sexual freedom and the right not to be dependent on men.

We can say so much about it, but it still doesn't make sense in so many ways! How can so many people, including so many women, believe welfare recipients are ripping everyone off? How can they worry so much about people getting a tiny little check that obviously doesn't cover even basic survival?

**Nancy:** One of the stigmas that I feel the most is about being a single parent. I feel like the media is always attacking us for that. I think to myself, "But anybody can be a single parent. Anybody can wind up in that predicament." You can be a woman living in the suburbs with three kids and have been a housewife for the last ten years and your husband dies of a heart attack. And then what are you going to do? But people forget all that. And they say, "Well, they are uneducated women living in the city who made a poor choice of who they slept with." They did something bad—which means they're bad—and that's why they have a kid all by themselves. And they look down on you. Instead of saying, "Well, it's respectable that they're doing something right, to get ahead." That's what bothers me more than anything else—people don't want to help you get up, they want to keep you down.

**Linda:** What's incredible to me is that people have demonized women who are taking care of children. CEOs kill people every day through economic terrorism—downsizing and making people lose how many millions or billions of jobs. And what does job loss mean? That person will maybe resort to alcoholism, drug addiction? What about the domestic violence that happens as a result of this? Corporations that make, oh, who knows, six billion dollars in profit and close their company and move down to Mexico where they can pay someone eleven cents an hour. And no one says that those CEOs are responsible for the deaths of people in this country. No one blames them for being evil and tightfisted.

**Stephanie:** Yes, that's the thing. The scapegoating of women on welfare is one great way to take attention from how terrible the United States economy is becoming for more and more people. We have been convinced to blame it on the people on the very bottom instead of looking at the top and saying, "Look, rich people and corporations have gotten so much richer over the last 30 years! What does that mean? Who has lost?" There has to be a powerful antagonism against people who have the least—or too many of us might start looking up instead of down. And then you have anti-immigrant bashing, racism, homophobia, to make people not see.

**Betty:** Another thing is that welfare "reform" is playing havoc with organizing, because people don't have any time. Because of welfare cuts, it's become harder and harder for us to fight back.

**Lea:** I don't know how I'm going to make it. But I have to. We all do. Sometimes we even smile, not to show how we feel. We're survivors, and we do what we have to do to survive.

*Stephanie Poggi is the editor of* Sojourner.


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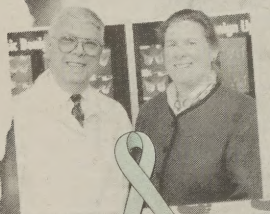

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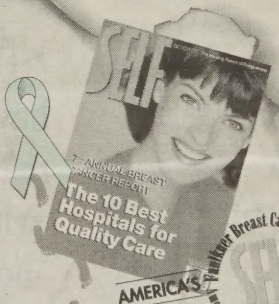


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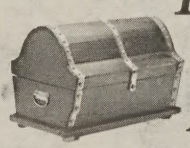

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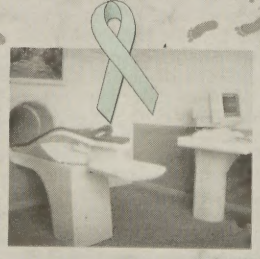

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*Opening Friday, January 8th*

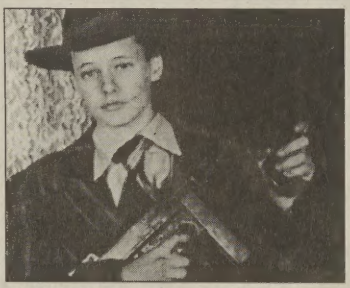
## STICKY FINGERS OF TIME

**Directed by Hilary Brougher**

Pulp writer Tucker Harding is mysteriously transported from 1953 to 1997. Wandering through the East Village, she meets Drew, a jaded suicidal woman trying to escape the city. This sci-fi neo-feminist tale offers a glimpse of what could have been and what yet might be.

**Friday, January 8th at 7:00pm**

*Director Hilary Brougher and Producer Ted Hope will introduce opening night screening. Q&A to follow screening. This is a co-presentation of the Boston Film/Video Foundation and part of BF/VF's ongoing MEET THE DIRECTOR series*



*Opening Friday, January 15th*

## THE BRANDON TEENA STORY

**Directed by Susan Muska & Greta Olafsdotir**

*Winner - Best Documentary - Berlin Film Festival*

Brandon Teena was born Teena Brandon in Lincoln, Nebraska. At age 20, she decides to change her identity and move to nearby Falls City. As Brandon, he begins dating several girls but when the truth comes out Brandon is brutally raped and murdered. This true story offers a harrowing account of hatred in America's heartland.

**"Riveting" - *Time Out* "Probing, Powerful" - *Variety***

*Sunday, January 17th*
*ONE TIME ONLY*

## DEAR JESSE

**Directed by Tim Kirkman**

The Coolidge brings back this award-winning documentary about the filmmaker's journey home to North Carolina to understand Senator Jesse Helms' enduring polititcal strength and homophobic attitudes. The film now features footage of Matthew Shepard, the gay-bashing victim killed in Wyoming this year. Kirkman has chosen to add this footage as a poignant post-script.

***Director Tim Kirkman - In Person!!***
***Call theatre for showtime.***

*Opening Friday, January 29th*

## PREACHING TO THE PERVERTED

**Directed by Stuart Urban**

A fast paced no-holds barred comic excursion into the exploding sexual underground of London. Starring Guinevere Turner as sex goddess Tanya Cheex.

***Grand Opening! presents fetish diva Mistress Midori on opening night, Friday, January 29th!***

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